



9

STORY BY
Rhythm Aida
ART BY
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Reincarnated as the Piggy Duke

*This Time I'm Gonna ♡
Tell Her How I Feel!*





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Reincarnated as the Piggy Duke
This Time I'm Gonna Tell Her How I Feel!



“The Piggy Duke was intelligent, strong, kindhearted, and sadly, too stubborn for his own good. From another perspective, the story of Shuya Marionette can be interpreted as his tragedy.”

—Director of Shuya Marionette

Prologue: A Shocking Betrothal

I craned my neck to look up at the sky.

“Oiiinkaaah!!!!!!!!!!”

When push came to shove, I usually resorted to one of two methods of escapism.

I let out one grunt after another until the sound built to a long, drawn-out yell. “Aaah!!!!!!!!!!”

The first was binge eating—a perfect way to relieve stress.

“Ah, aaah, AAAH!”

The second was exercise. I’d recently gone through an extreme weight-loss regimen, one that caused me to have an epiphany—after a workout, I came out feeling refreshed. They say a healthy body led to a healthy mind, and I found that I agreed with the sentiment.

Okay, the point I’m trying to make is...

“Hrmph, aaah!!!!!!!!!!!!!!”

...I’m not all out sprinting in order to lose weight.

Only moments earlier, I’d heard about my *engagement* to Alicia from Shuya, and I was currently very busy running away from reality. Literally.

What Shuya said had been a bolt from the blue. If I weighed my shock at this announcement on a scale, it wouldn’t be an exaggeration to say that it ranked up there with the world-shattering day I’d gained the knowledge of the anime. *I mean, think about it. Me? Marrying? Alicia?! Dude, that’s not even funny as a joke!*

“Oink, oink...” I snorted all orc-like as I walked alone down the path that’d lead me to the boys’ dorms. I didn’t have to worry about my safety at all, even though night had fallen over campus. Kirsch Mage Institute was the picture of peace. Sure, unsavory people had infiltrated the school before, but well, those were exceptions, not the norm.

I snorted weakly to myself. *Okay, I think it’s about time to face reality. What exactly did Shuya say again?*

I recalled his words: “*I mean, I only heard some gossip about it, so I dunno much. But man, did that come as a shock. I thought your engagement with Alicia was a thing of the past.*”

Hmm... Ugh, I’m drawing a blank. Even after calming down a bit, I still can’t make heads or tails of it all. Let’s just say in the super unlikely—

in the impossible—even that he was right... Why did I have to hear such important news from Shuya, of all people?! And who in the world did he hear that news from, huh?! Alicia? Oh, Alicia would never open up to Shuya about me. If anything, she probably bad-mouths me all the time.

Only silence kept me company as my thoughts spiraled out of control. *Even if he was right, I don't think he would've heard about that engagement from Alicia, which begs the question... Where did Shuya learn this information? Are the rumors already spreading throughout Kirsch? If that's the case... This is a nightmare.*

I shook my head furiously. "Come on, Slowe, why waste your time thinking about this?"

I wanted to laugh off Shuya's words, as ridiculous as they were. *An engagement to Alicia? That went up in smoke a long time ago when I became a human orc, mind you. Even in my wildest, most delirious dreams, that engagement isn't happening. Actually, Alicia would be the loudest voice of opposition. I mean, she'd have to marry me!*

The strenuous exercise left me heaving, and I slowly steadied my breath. The problem was, I didn't think Shuya would go out of his way to lie about something like this. That guy was eccentric and problematic in every way, but at his core, he was a virtuous and good-natured guy. I mean, he was an anime protagonist—he couldn't be too bad.

At this point, everything started seeming suspicious to me, and my paranoia made me wary of even the gazes of students on me as I made my way back to the dorms. It might not have been the sweat and the stench that made them stare at me so...it might have been their curiosity about my engagement!

Though I knew thinking about it would get me nowhere with how little information I had, once the seed of unease had been planted, it was hard to get it out of my mind. *Ugh... You know, at this point I might as well brace myself and just ask them straight about why they're looking at me.*

I chewed my lip in frustration. Naturally, I wouldn't do such a thing, because people would start calling me the blackhearted Piggy Duke again. *But no matter how hard I think about it, it's still weird. Why did it have to be Shuya? So let's just say, like, for argument's sake, that he was telling the truth. If he were, then...*

I kept circling back to one thought. *Why the heck does Shuya know such significant information, while I, the person actually involved in this, have absolutely no clue about this engagement?! Is it because, ugh, I don't have that many friends or something? Damn it! Why am I always left out of the loop with critical matters?!*

Shuya was joking. He. Was. Joking. He had to be!

It was already late, so I couldn't go find Charlotte and ask her

about what was going on. Left with no choice, I returned to my room and silently lay in my bed.

“Oink...” I snorted pathetically.

As one would expect, sleep didn’t come to me easily. And when it rained, it poured—that night, I had a nightmare. In that nightmare, Alicia beat me into a pulp, screaming, “*Why in the world do I have to marry an orc like Slowe?!*” She’d gone on a rampage, whaling on me with her fists.

The only thing I could do was pray that it wasn’t a premonition.

With anxiety eating away at me, I washed my face quickly and waited for Charlotte to come around. The sun had yet to rise, but I didn’t think I could sleep a minute longer. Time seemed to stretch on forever, and it felt like the hands of the clock moved in slow motion. A single minute seemed to drag on into infinity.

As for the reason I was so anxious for Charlotte’s arrival... Once a week, Charlotte would bring over letters from House Denning. The letters would arrive at Kirsch in the middle of night, and she would collect them before coming to my room on the fourth floor of the boys’ dorm early in the morning. She’d come over and say in a sing-song voice, “Master Slowe, a letter for you!”

And you guessed it—the day after Shuya dropped that bomb on me, today, was one such day.

Anxious, I muttered, “Where is she? How much longer is she going to take? Why isn’t she here yet?”

I could have headed over to her place before she made her way here, but the thing was, Charlotte lived in the girls’ dorm with the rest of the retainer girls. Going there meant that I might come across her before she had time to wash up in the morning, and she probably didn’t want me to see her like that. As long as I received permission, going into the girls’ dorm was possible, but heading there early in the morning would definitely be cause for gossip.

I stood in front of the door, letting out rhythmical grunts as I exercised. *Charlotte, please hurry*, I pleaded in my mind. *My thoughts are going crazy. At this rate, my brain will explode.* Was Shuya right? Was my engagement to Alicia back on again? I wanted to know the answer right now. Being stuck in a state of unrest was agonizing.

I mean, even if I found some random person to ask... How *could* I? *It’s not like I can go up to them and ask, “Hey, you know about that news about me? Am I really engaged to Alicia again?”* This was a momentous matter, one that would decide my future! Why should I ask a random student at Kirsch for confirmation? They weren’t even involved!

“Oink, oink...”

My body seemed to have a mind of its own. Wanting to clear my

mind, I began doing squats. My phase hadn't ended—last night, I'd sprinted at full speed for nearly one hour like a madman, and now, I was trying to cope by exercising again. Due to the strain on my body, my muscles protested in pain.

I continued to grunt as the exercises wore on. Who cared about soreness right now? If I didn't do something to distract me, my thoughts would wander back to the information I'd heard from Shuya.

Okay. Charlotte is going to come in and tell me that an engagement between me and Alicia was absurd. She's gonna say, "Master Slowe, someone made that up." We'll then laugh and forget about it. Yeah, that's what we'll do.

I was so absorbed in my strength workout that I completely missed the knocks that echoed through my room.

A pale Charlotte charged into my room. "M-M-Master Slowe! Are you awake?! I have news! Big new—" She crashed into me, sending the both of us tumbling to the ground. "Gaaah!!! Why are you naked and *why are you so close*?! Clothes! Put on some clothes first!"

In a panic, Charlotte scrambled to her feet before dashing over to my closet to retrieve my clothes and handing them to me. Charlotte was actually more familiar with my room than I was.

"G-Good morning, Charlotte," I stammered.

"Now is not the time to be saying that! Clothes! Put on your clothes! You're *naked*!"

"Charlotte, calm down first. Has something big happened concerning me? Can you tell me what's going on before we do anything else?"

"Something crazy *is* happening! Why did I find you naked when I opened the door?!"

Oh. Oops, I wasn't considerate enough. I'd gotten hot during my workout, and I must have thrown off my clothes without realizing it somewhere down the line. I scanned around to find my clothes lying in a mess on the ground.

Charlotte's face was beet red as she held out new garments to me. But no, now wasn't the time for clothes, because I'd been waiting for Charlotte this whole time. "Charlotte! Please tell me about this big news you have about me! I'll put on clothes after that!"

"Jeez! Fine, I get it! I'll tell you, okay?! So, House Denning has sent us a letter, and... It says that they're going to announce your engagement to Lady Alicia, and they want you to make a trip back home!"

When I stepped out of the boys' dorm, I discovered that the entire school was in a frenzy. I was very used to being the center of attention by now, but this time, it was a little different.

“Look, that’s Lord Denning! Wow, the guy looks like he isn’t concerned at all!”

“He always puts on this indifferent air, as if he doesn’t care that much about girls, but sheesh, he’s still so far ahead of us in the race of romance! I guess we shouldn’t have expected anything less from a member of House Denning!”

The attention on me was a cut above all my previous experiences. Curious gazes pierced me from every direction, no matter where I turned. I could hear bits and pieces of their conversations, and from those, it was easy to piece together what they were gossiping about.

A younger student yelled, “Hey guys, have you heard the rumors?! Lady Alicia and Lord Denning are getting *engaged!*”

I’d heard the exact same news from Charlotte this morning. But there was no way I’d just believe it without a struggle, so I’d asked Charlotte to confirm with House Denning first.

Yet another shout pierced the air. “Lord Denning! How in the world did you manage to win over Lady Alicia, of all people?! Eek, I’m so sorry, I wasn’t thinking!”

Just one glare is enough to send him running for the hills. What right does he have to ask me such a bizarre question, huh? That aside... Calling this stressful isn’t even close to describing what I’m feeling right now.

The student body chatted on, not caring for my feelings at all.

“Still, this is the news of the century! A member of House Denning is getting engaged to Cirquistan royalty! Lord Denning knew that info all this time, but managed to keep it under wraps. Wow, he’s an amazing actor!”

“Oh, you big moron. This is House Denning we’re talking about. That kind of thing’s a piece of cake for them. Look at how confident he is. Nothing we say’s gonna faze him!” A whistle. “He’s sooo cool!”

Uh, actually, I am very fazed by all the stuff you’re saying. If it were possible, I wanted to ditch classes and hide from reality in the safety of my bed. There’s one thing that’s bothering me, though... How did everyone learn about this so quickly? Where did they even get the news?! I only heard the news this morning from Charlotte. My intelligence network was practically nonexistent. I felt inadequate—I was a Denning, but I didn’t even have that much! It must be because I had way too few friends. Should I start another big operation to make friends with Charlotte’s help?

In spite of the hectic situation, my stomach still protested in hunger. *Human bodies are such a wonder...*

“Oi! Careful, Lord Denning looks grumpy!”

“I’m so jealous! This is Lady Alicia we’re talking about, you know. She’s the cutest girl at school! Denning isn’t worthy of her!”

Once I entered the dining hall, the sound of all the boisterous

chatter died out instantly. But in exchange...

...a *ridiculous* number of eyes bored into me like spikes. No thanks to them, I couldn't even remember what I'd eaten afterwards.

Everyone observed me from a distance, and nobody dared approach. At least, until one person plopped down next to me. This person must've either had a terrible morning or was just in a downright bad mood—they slammed their tray of food onto the table with a clank, their soup sloshing out noisily.

Hm? You wanna fight or something? I'll gladly take you up on that. Determined, I lifted my head. There, I found...

"S-S-Slowe. Can we talk?"

...a girl. And a gorgeous beauty, at that. If she was just a little older, I'd have been willing to bet that countless suitors would be asking for her hand during her every waking moment—she gave me those kinds of vibes. Right now, this stunning beauty had a contorted expression on her intricate face as she looked at me.



Yes—the other subject of the day’s rumors had made her grand entrance. It was Alicia, the exchange student from Cirquista.

“W-W-Wow, what a coincidence, Alicia,” I stammered. “I actually wanted to talk to you a bit as well.”

Every single person inside the dining hall trained their eyes on us. But we were so solemn that we couldn’t spare a lick of attention to that fact.

“Alicia, is it true?”

“...What are you talking about?”

“Don’t play dumb. I’m referring to our possible engagement.”

If I’d been mistaken, I was doing something pretty embarrassing right now. I mean, I was personally telling my former fiancée that we might get engaged again. If she scowled at me and said, “You’ve got the wrong idea, what were you even thinking?” I’d be so ashamed that I’d dig a hole and bury myself in it. I’d probably spend the next few days shying away from Alicia’s accusing gaze, lamenting how delusional I’d been.

People might even start rumors about how the Piggy Duke couldn’t tell reality from fantasy anymore. By the spirits, they might even start assuming that I was some cringey guy who indulged in such wild dreams on a daily basis.

But in the end... Asking her directly was the most sensible choice, so I chose to do that first.

“... ”

“..... ”

“..... ”

A long moment of silence ensued.

Alicia seemed to be taken by surprise as well. Her mouth was gaping open in shock.

“M-Miss Alicia...?” I prompted tentatively. *Wait, is she gobsmacked too? But I guess...that’s to be expected.*

Even after I’d become the earnest Piggy Duke, Alicia and I weren’t friends who talked to each other. We interacted more as a trio—one that included Shuya—but our original relationship had been rather disastrous. Alicia absolutely despised me. We’d kept our distance from each other for a long time, but now, we were confronting each other face-to-face.

I fell silent in a mix of relief and mortification. *Okay, I can tell. So I was worried for nothing in the end. I heard a bunch of weird rumors that Alicia and I would get married, but all of that was my ears malfunctioning. Good.*

Knowing Alicia, a few seconds later, she’d explode on me and yell,

“How could I *ever* marry a guy like you?!” I raised my arms to shield my face and prepared to go on the defense.

But then, after a pause, I could hear Alicia’s appalled voice. “What the heck are you doing?”

“Well, I thought you might punch me. I mean, there’s no way we’d ever get engaged.”

Silence. She didn’t move so much as a muscle.

Hold on... This silence has dragged on for a suspiciously long amount of time. “A-Alicia? You there?”

“I’ll be blunt, okay? Right now, we are both stuck in a crisis. I think you’ve heard it from Miss Charlotte already, but yes. Our engagement is back on.”

Those were the last words I wanted to hear right now.

We couldn’t exactly keep talking in such a public space. Alicia and I barely had any breakfast before we sneaked over to a desolate corner of the campus, away from prying eyes.

Alicia began her explanation with ire clear on her face. It was obvious that she had many complaints about what she was about to say. *I can’t blame her. She’s engaged to me, of all people.*

“Slowe. You went overboard. You saved Kirsch and became a Dragon Slayer. In short, you became a suitable candidate for a political marriage to me.”

Alicia was a member of the royal family in Cirquista, one of the major countries of the south. And well, Cirquista, as a tradition, tended to view their royalty as pawns for marriages to strengthen political ties. Alicia was the right age, and I’d heard that whenever she returned home, her family would hound her constantly about her future plans. If I remembered correctly, in the anime, she’d gone grumbling to Shuya whenever she received a political marriage proposal.

“Suitable?” I raised an eyebrow. “Come on, doesn’t your country know that I’m a human with my own will and opinions?”

“I’m sure you also know the likes of my homeland very well.”

“Well... Yeah, I guess.”

She was right—Cirquista was like that. Through political marriages, they maintained their alliance with other countries. Beauty was something passed down impartially through the blood of the Cirquistan royal family, and none of them hesitated to drop exorbitant amounts of money to further their already ethereal looks. Alicia wasn’t an exception, and up close like this, she was nearly a goddess in human form. Many of the guys at Kirsch were left giddy after Alicia talked to them. Seeing them all flustered was a pretty frequent sight here. Honestly, I could understand it.

But. Charlotte was the only one for me, and I couldn't just take this engagement lying down.

In a serious tone, I addressed her, "Alicia. Be honest with me. What is your opinion on all this?"

This was the second time we'd been engaged. Alicia was prideful, and I was sure that she'd rebel if someone forced such an absurd thing on her. There was an insurmountable rift between us—our engagement had dissolved in the past because I'd become the blackhearted Piggy Duke. I still remembered how heartbroken Alicia had looked when she had seen how hopeless I had become. So I was sure that she disliked me now, and perhaps, she even resented me.

"I think it's ridiculous."

Yeah, I thought as much.

Then, Alicia continued, "I'm not going to let my father decide my future for me again. I'm going to do everything I can to nip this thing in the bud."

Alicia looked so dependable and promising when she said that.

She added, "Slowe, I know we're facing a formidable opponent, but you need to do your best too."

...But that promise didn't last long, because a few days later, Alicia began shutting herself away in her room.

Chapter 1: The Hermit Cirquistan Princess

I immediately summoned Charlotte after school that day, after Alicia had returned to her dorm room.

“Charlotte,” I began gravely, “we need to have a strategy meeting.”

The topic of our debate was, of course, all the stuff going on about my shocking engagement with Alicia.

Faced with silence, I muttered worriedly, “Charlotte?”

For some reason, Charlotte didn’t seem to have her usual energy. In fact, I’d even go so far as to say that she was dejected. She’d seemed relatively normal when I’d talked to her this morning despite the news, and not much time had passed since then. *Has something happened since then?* My engagement was an urgent matter, but Charlotte’s health was more important to me.

She replied in a weak voice, “I didn’t notice in the morning, but this time, there wasn’t just a letter for you, Master Slowe. There was actually a letter for me as well, for once, and...”

“Oink,” I snorted encouragingly.

“I... They told me to persuade you to say yes to the...to the engagement with Lady Alicia.”

I see. That makes sense. As the saying went, “he that would the daughter win, must with the mother first begin.” If House Denning wanted this sudden engagement to succeed, their first obvious point of attack would be Charlotte, who was with me twenty-four seven.

For a moment, neither of us knew what to say. Charlotte was hesitant, seeming to wrestle with her thoughts. It was likely because she was aware that she would have to go against the orders of House Denning.

“What...should I do?” she muttered helplessly.

My relationship with Charlotte was, naturally, a secret from House Denning. At the same time, in the back of my mind, I’d known that we couldn’t hide it forever. In hindsight, if I’d known this would happen, maybe I should’ve disclosed it to my family earlier.

But hey, in my defense I never expected that something like this—something that would fracture our relationship—would come around so soon!

“Ch-Charlotte. I actually had a conversation with Alicia this

morning.”

“I know. It’s the hot topic of the school at the moment.”

“Huh? Wait, really?”

Did the students not have enough classes or anything? How much free time did they even have? Shouldn’t they put it into use and study instead of getting excited about this?

“Right now, there is way more attention on you than anything we’ve ever seen before, so the rumors spread pretty much instantly.”

The entire school seemed to be watching every little movement Alicia and I made like a hawk. That didn’t make me happy at all—in fact, it was rather concerning. I had to watch myself extra carefully whenever I was in public.

I hesitated. “So, um... Charlotte, what did they say in the letter addressed to you?”

The mission they gave to Charlotte was to hide the engagement from *me*, the party involved. If that wasn’t possible, she had to persuade me so that my engagement would proceed smoothly with Alicia.

Wow. House Denning sure put a lot of thought into this. Those guys probably had known that I’d definitely object to it. Their ideal plan had been to cut off all my paths of escape before officially telling me about my engagement. By then, everyone else involved would have already agreed, so if I were the lone protester, I’d cause trouble to everyone, and I’d crumple under the peer pressure. A smart plan, I had to admit. After all, if Alicia were willing, it’d be hard for me to refuse.

Unfortunately for them, the entire school already knew about our engagement, and I’d even heard it from Shuya last night. House Denning had gotten sloppy this time. And most important of all, Alicia would never agree. Was House Denning so confident that they’d be able to convince Alicia while I was kept in the dark? Did they have a special plan?

I went silent as I looked at Charlotte. Charlotte was indebted to House Denning. They’d taken her under their wing after she fled from Huzak, and she’d been under their care ever since. To her, it was likely agonizing to even think of disobeying their orders. She looked very distressed.

“I’m fine, I understand. In the end, there’s too big of a difference in status between us...” she whispered in a small voice.

“Hold up. What in the world are you saying? If we’re talking about status, I’m the one who doesn’t deserve you at all...!”

She was a princess, someone who would’ve stood at the top of the hierarchy in an aristocracy, if not for the past events. It was absurd for

someone of her standing to be my retainer to begin with.

I continued, "You don't have to blame yourself at all for accidentally showing the letter to me too early. I mean, I actually knew of my engagement with Alicia before you told me!"

Because Shuya told me first, I thought bitterly. If I had to hear it from someone, why couldn't it have been Alicia, at least? But thanks to him, Charlotte technically didn't disobey House Denning. So, Shuya, good job there.

I cleared my throat. "First things first, I'd like to declare my position on all this. No matter what anyone says, I like *you*. Even if it's the end of the world, my feelings towards you will never waver." *Okay, I pulled that off smoothly. I was direct about my true feelings.* "So there's nothing you have to w-worry aboutink!"

I messed up. I messed up moments after I had celebrated. *Why do I keep doing this?! Mortified, I could feel my cheeks burning up. I wanted to be cool to the end when it was a key moment, but... It never goes well for me.*

We stared at each other in silence. A blush crept up Charlotte's face, and despite how pathetic I'd been, she gave me a small nod.

Back to the topic of our emergency: my engagement with Alicia. This morning, I'd asked about Alicia's opinion, and she'd reacted exactly as I'd predicted. In short, we both thought it was out of the question. Neither of us wanted a thing to do with this engagement, so I found it really odd that our families were marching on without us. That was what marriages for political alliances were like, I guess.

At Kirsch, Alicia and I were considered the most influential people on campus, but even we couldn't do a thing to stand up against our families—the entities with *real* political influence. Tragic, but unfortunately, that was how reality worked.

Nervously, Charlotte spoke up. "So, Master Slowe, I spent quite some time trying to come up with ideas, but I couldn't come up with any good ones... What should we do?"

I, actually, had a brilliant idea. I was a genius today. "Let's run away from this country!" I declared boldly.

Yes, that was perfect. I could just throw away the "Denning" part of my name! I'd be reduced to a mere Mister Slowe, no longer Lord Denning, and surely even Cirquista would be reluctant to do something outrageous like making Princess Alicia marry a mere commoner.

"You make it sound easy, Master Slowe, but... Do we even have anywhere to go?"

"Don't you worry, I've researched for a long time in case this day ever arrived!" I announced triumphantly.

Snorting to myself, I whipped out a book from underneath my bed. As the blackhearted Piggy Duke, I actually *had* considered places I could escape to with Charlotte. The book I retrieved was a catalog of places we could take refuge in. Cramped rows lined up on the pages, creating a list of areas that ranged from minor countries in the south to places in the Dustour Empire. I'd even marked the more ideal locations with big, red circles. One could tell how much thought I'd put into plans to run away with Charlotte in case I ever had to resort to it.

"Master Slowe... How much research did you even put into this?" Charlotte sounded a little appalled.

"Well, as they say, better safe than sorry."

But... I knew that I was only running away from reality. Charlotte would never choose to run away, and she could never throw away her ties with House Denning. She felt deeply grateful towards House Denning, even considering dedicating her entire life to give back to my family. Eloping with me, who was much talked about in House Denning...she'd never choose that sort of future.

But hey, surely you wouldn't blame me for wanting to look away from reality for a little while, right?

Many of my brothers, also of House Denning, were actually the right age to marry. But none of them had even a sliver of interest in their own marriage because they were a bunch of battle junkies who'd pick a fight over a girl any day. That was probably why I'd ended up drawing the short straw in the marriage department, since I wasn't at our family home right now and also happened to have the weakest voice inside my family.

"L-Lord Denning, you don't seem to be eating much... Did something happen?" Tina sounded worried.

I wanted to run. I wanted to scream. I wanted to throw a tantrum, but somehow, I managed to suppress these urges. *Calm down, Slowe.*

I knew the evil scheme of the higher-ups in House Denning. But I wasn't going to let them push me around. *In case all of you forgot, I'm not a Goody Two-shoes who'd listen to orders obediently.* Actually, that was probably why they'd given such orders to Charlotte—so that they could make me do their bidding. Unfortunately for them, Charlotte was on my side.

"I can't believe this... Lord Denning isn't eating...!"

"Please keep it down, Miss Tina. Lord Slowe has a rather tricky matter on his hands." Ever the voice of reason, that Valjean.

I'd considered asking Claude for a report on the current state of affairs, but that guy had disappeared from the medical building before I'd realized he'd gone. Apparently, there had suddenly been urgent

business he had to attend to, and he'd left the medical building in a rush before heading back to Denning lands.

That guy... I'm willing to bet that he made a run for it because he was scared that I'd drag him into a mess after I heard about the engagement. Claude always had such tendencies, ugh... He probably didn't want to be the rope in a tug-of-war between me and House Denning.

"Ah... Lord Valjean! Are you possibly, well, referring to what I think you're referring to? You know, the rumors that Lord Denning and Lady Alicia are getting engaged?"

"Yes. I am."

At any rate, it was impossible for me to agree to a marriage with Alicia, especially one that popped out of nowhere. On House Denning's front, well, it'd work out somehow. As a last resort, I was even willing to make them listen with my fists and wand, if need be. The more problematic of the two houses was Cirquista, because apparently, Alicia's home country had been the one that had started it all.

"It's meant to be a happy event, but... He's frowning about it. Being a noble sure is tough..."

"Yeah, it is pretty tough. So let's give Lord Slowe some space for now."

Charlotte had been worried that if I did anything reckless, there'd be impulsive people who'd try to matchmake Alicia with someone crazy again, and I was inclined to agree. Then again, there was the possibility that in Cirquista's calculations, Alicia would agree to it because we were somewhat familiar with each other, which was why they'd chosen to push forward with it.

I snapped out of it. "Ah, hey, hold up, Valjean. Don't take away my dinner without asking me first. I'll eat it, okay? I'll eat up properly..."

When night fell, Alicia visited my room. Charlotte had been the only girl who'd ever come to my room before. Well, other than Suz, but Suz was technically a djinn, so she didn't count. *Considering the current state of Kirsch, people would make a big fuss if Alicia came to my room either way, even for a short visit... But she looks like she couldn't care less.* Alicia had the heart of a lion, unlike me.

She didn't beat around the bush—the first thing that came out of her mouth was the reason why they'd reinstated my engagement to Alicia, a princess of Cirquista.

"They want to strengthen the ties between Cirquista and Daryth."

I paused. "You mean that they chose *us* for *that*?"

Hey, come on. That's absurd. How could we be noteworthy enough to be used as pawns to reinforce the relations between two nations? I supposed that countless countries *had* strengthened their ties through

marriage alliances between children hailing from influential families through the ages. But in our case... I had my doubts that we would fit the bill.

"You haven't realized yet, Slowe? Right now, rumors about the return of the Prodigy of Wind are spreading far and wide, and not a few countries are scrambling for a way to approach you, you know."

I gaped. "For real?"

"I think other people have probably offered you their hands in marriage as well, not just me. That being said, the countries making these offers likely aren't as powerful as Cirquista... After all, the bigger the country, the more cautious they are about their every move.

Cirquista only got the jump on this because of our previous engagement and because we're fellow students here at Kirsch. I don't really want to describe it this way, but, well... I'm guessing that according to their calculations, we might get back together easily or something." Alicia sighed. "What a terrible country I was born in."

Cirquistan royalty *did* customarily marry off their sons and daughters to other countries for political status. Alicia was probably right—that was why they'd targeted me. I'd failed to intimidate them with my international infamy, and they had offered up their princess on a platter. That was likely proof of how much they expected of me and my abilities.

Jeez... As always, Alicia's father has an abnormally sharp intuition about such matters... Cirquista was very generous about investing in would-be heroes who had bright futures ahead of them.

But I never expected matters about my marriage partner to become such a big deal that so many other countries would get involved. I mean, this is me we're talking about!

I couldn't find the words to reply, so Alicia plowed on. "Slowe," she said after a moment. "Your blindness to your reputation is your shortcoming."

Honestly, I couldn't come up with any rebuttals to that.



That night, I had a *crazy* dream. A crazy dream that I married *Alicia*.

Charlotte was still my retainer, looking after me on a daily basis. But she'd look at me with hurt in her eyes and aim biting remarks at me every single day. "So you were lying to me back then... How could you, Master Slowe?! I trusted you!"

Halfway through the proceedings, I realized it was a dream, but I just couldn't wake up. Thanks to that, Charlotte showered me with a hail of scathing comments.

Our hearts had once been connected by our mutual love, and even

during the shocking engagement, I'd gallantly told her that she was the only one for me. But in the end, I'd ended up marrying Alicia.

And though I recognized that this was only my imagination running amok, Charlotte's words still pierced my heart like knives.

"Oh, you... Was Charlotte mad at you again? You poor thing."

Wait, what? Why is Alicia in my bedroom? But it felt like a perfectly normal occurrence. No. I get it. This is a dream, so it's not my fault... It's a dream, it's just a dream, so... Wait, this is a dream, right?

I was lying in bed with Alicia, acting like a spoiled child in front of her. I was whimpering, "Charlotte yelled at me today too..." *This is a dream, right?!*

As I needily vied for Alicia's attention, she gave me reassuring pats on my head, which felt blissful...

"Ah!" I snapped my eyes open with a startled gasp.

Oh, it was a dream. I mean, I knew that it was a dream and all, but it just wouldn't end. It felt super realistic—so real that for a minute, I could almost believe it was reality.

Alicia marrying me, that was. *Alicia marrying me.*

No! That's wrong! At this rate, I'll become the scum of all scum. And marrying the great princess of Cirquista just doesn't sit right with me.

"Oink," I muttered as I stood in front of the mirror. In the reflection, I saw a chubby guy who had become much more refined than in years past. *Remember, Slowe. Remember the oath you made when you saw your reflection back then—that you would do anything it took to be with Charlotte.*

My engagement with Alicia was revived because I became the earnest Piggy Duke. I won't deny it. But I don't regret all my efforts to turn over a new leaf. If I continued being the scorned person I was, I wouldn't even have been able to confess to Charlotte.

I let out a small, determined snort. *Okay. Yeah, let's go look for Alicia. Trying to come up with a solution out of this mess by myself isn't getting me anywhere. I should cooperate with Alicia, who has the same fire in her heart.*

Slapping my cheek, I let out a firm snort. *All right, I've got a plan. When I wake up tomorrow morning, I'll go find Alicia immediately. We'll team up and tell our families to cut it out with this nonsense. We'll yell at them and say, "Don't you dare think you can get away with interfering with other people's lives!"*

Unfortunately, my plans easily crumbled, washed away like a sandcastle swamped by a high tide.

"What? Alicia won't come out of her room?"

It had only taken a second for that rumor to spread throughout the campus. Alicia had stopped showing up to classes—in fact, we

could even say that she was shutting herself away in her room.

Alicia was currently the center of attention, so you could argue that she'd hidden herself away because she disliked all the prying eyes, but... *She came to my room last night, so that can't be it. Plus, I thought she didn't care about what people whispered about her. Yet...*

I could hear the chatter of students.

"Lady Alicia must've been very distressed. I mean, she was suddenly told that she'd have to marry Denning! Of course she'd get a nasty fright. He has gotten much more decent lately, but we all know what he used to be like."

"Yeah. We never know when he might turn back into a human orc."

"This is something I heard from a girl once, but apparently, Lady Alicia gets profiles of potential marriage partners from Cirquista every month. I mean, she is a princess of Cirquista, so it's no wonder. She could have had any fish in the sea she wanted, but Lady Alicia rejected them all."

"Anyway... Maaan, looks like you really can get cute girls without even doing anything when you're from a powerful family."

These guys seemed to think that I couldn't hear them, but... *Unfortunately for y'all, I'm enhancing my hearing with magic, you know. It's a piece of cake for me. Ugh, these guys are just saying whatever they want. After that terrifying dream last night, I'm really stressed right now, but they haven't got a clue. But... I guess when it comes to topics like this, it'd just make things worse if the people involved reacted in any sort of way.*

Though I could hear all these inconsiderate words, I decided to ignore them all. This was the best, safest choice. As long as I kept up a *What does that have to do with me?* attitude, eventually, the situation might settle down. With that prayer in mind, I feigned deafness to all the gossip. But I couldn't fully hide my distress.

Oh, oops. I bumped into someone.

The student I'd walked into began to cheer for me. "Ah! Lord Denning! Congratulations on your engagement to Lady Alicia!"

"Hooray for Lord Denning!" cried another.

Okay, I couldn't just *not* react to this. They were talking to me directly and bringing up the forbidden topic! But with a do-or-die determination, I managed to keep my reaction to a thin frown. I offered no reply.

Anyway, let's talk about Alicia. What the heck happened to her? Princess Carina once became a hermit, actually, so is it a trend for princesses nowadays to seclude themselves or something? With how things are... How am I supposed to get a hold of Alicia?

Apparently, Alicia was refusing all visitors. A cold, she said. She might spread it to anyone in her vicinity—therefore, she allowed no one to check up on her either.

It wasn't like her to become indisposed, considering the situation we were in. I'd headed towards the girls' dorms, wanting to meet her in person, but the housemistress had given me that exact same explanation and had refused my request. "Even if you are Lord Denning, I am afraid it is impossible," she'd said.

I could hear the chatter of students here too.

"It must be because she hated the idea of getting engaged to that guy."

"I know saying this isn't fair to Lady Alicia, but isn't there a rumor going around that Lord Denning first started acting weird because he hated his initial engagement with her? Her pride must be wounded."

Oi, why did they pin the blame on me? I'm hurt, man. Do these guys think anything goes as long as I'm the one they're slandering? Maybe I should temporarily switch to blackhearted-Piggy-Duke-mode and teach them a lesson. A rather ominous idea began brewing in my mind.

"Oiiink," I sighed. *But then again... Darn it. I can actually see some sense in what they say. If I think about this carefully, it really is my fault that Alicia ended up becoming a hermit.*

Right now, Alicia was all alone. I had an ally whom I could confide in about everything—Charlotte—but she didn't, at least not at the moment. In the anime, Alicia had Shuya. But in this world, those two weren't as close as they had been in that universe. This change was my fault, because I'd made so many moves to nip the war with Dustour in the bud. Thus, most of the events that'd make them grow closer didn't happen either.

The familiar voice of a girl drifted into my ears. "Ah. Lord Denning is brooding..."

"Hold up, Miss Tina. I would advise against talking to Lord Slowe at the moment. Look at his expression—he seems like he's deep in thought about his future, don't you agree?"

Alicia and Shuya... As I considered their relationship, I recalled a scene in the anime where Alicia had gone grumbling to Shuya. Alicia had despised her homeland, Cirquista, because the tradition of political marriage there had repulsed her. In fact, she'd even declared that she had resolved to abandon her country to flee this tradition when push came to shove.

But the most important part in that scene was when she'd said that—if I remembered correctly—there was another way to escape the clutches of political marriage as well. Alicia had explained it to Shuya once. According to her, as long as they located a certain item inside a certain dungeon, Cirquista could strengthen its political ties with

Daryth.

“...You’re right. I guess I shouldn’t have expected anything less from you, Lord Valjean. No wonder you’re Lord Denning’s friend.”

“Naturally. I know Lord Slowe better than anyone else. I can even tell from looking at his face that he has had a nightmare recently. Let’s see... I suppose I’ll make a request for Lord Slowe’s dinner to mainly consist of vegetables tonight so that he can get some quality sleep.”



Nah, that's kinda... I dunno. I instantly shot down the idea that floated to the surface of my mind. After all, the dungeon Alicia had mentioned in that scene was an...*infamous* place. People would even have qualms about uttering its name—the Labyrinth of Cirquista, Demon Land, otherwise known as the Demon's Prison.

In slight annoyance, I raised my voice. “You two, over there! For your information, I can hear everything you’re saying! Also, seriously, don’t make my dinner full of vegetables without my permission! No matter the occasion or where I am, I always want to have my fill of meat!”

At the dining hall during dinner, I spotted Shuya and decided to plop down right next to the guy. I’d wanted to ask him something, so I’d been waiting for him to show his face in the dining hall for a long time. Shuya, upon seeing me, scrunched up his face, clearly unhappy with his present dinner company.

Hey, what’s with that reaction? Ya know, you’re not the only one who has complaints here; I also do, but I’m swallowing it all down with impressive self-restraint. By the way, the one at the top of that list is: “Why the heck did I have to hear about my life-changing engagement with Alicia from you of all people?!”

“D-Denning. This kinda came outta nowhere,” he muttered, his eye twitching.

“There’s something I wanted to ask you, so...”

Like I mentioned before, Alicia had explained an escape method to Shuya in the anime. If they retrieved a specific magic item from a monster living inside Demon Land, all their problems would be gone. This was what I wanted to prod Shuya about. I wanted to know whether Alicia was working towards that last resort she’d mentioned.

I continued, “Oi, Shuya. You’re on good terms with Alicia, aren’t you? Have you heard anything directly from her about why she’s being a hermit? That excuse about a cold’s not fooling anyone.”

“I-I haven’t heard anything!”

“Really? If there’s something you’re hiding from me, tell me right now. If you fess up, I’ll give you my potatoes and carrots in return!”

But Shuya was a tough nut to crack. If potatoes weren’t enough of a bribe for him, I’d even considered gifting him one of my meat dishes, but he was a stubborn one. Judging by his reaction, however, there was a chance that he truly had no idea what I was talking about. True, the relationship between the two of them hadn’t progressed as much as the anime. *So...maybe Alicia hasn’t gone to him about the whole engagement thing this time after all?*

That night, I was deep in my thoughts on my bed. Of course the current subject of my brooding was, you know, that forbidden topic between Alicia and me.

Silence kept me company as I combed through the situation. Never in my wildest dreams had I thought Alicia would continue to be so passive about this matter. Alicia wasn't a person who'd meekly obey orders just because someone told her to—she had a will of her own, something that hadn't changed from her character in the anime. In fact, in the anime, Cirquista had once dumped an engagement offer with a sleazy guy on her, and she'd torn it apart with Shuya as her sidekick.

“Who in the world started having ideas about matching-making us two in the first place...?”

I was pretty sure by now that this engagement's main motive was to strengthen ties between these two countries. Cirquista would use me to build a sturdy foundation for a relationship with Daryth. Or at least, as long as our marriage provided some sort of support for the alliance, it was worth it in their eyes.

I dragged out a sigh. “Problem is, they're completely ignoring the opinions of the people involved, which is a huge pain...”

It would be surprisingly easy to nip this engagement in the bud. We just had to put something on the table that'd strengthen this tie even without our marriage. As long as we could prove to Cirquista that this alliance was solid, it'd be enough to well and truly put their anxieties to rest. And I supposed I had an ace up my sleeve which could do that. But...the problem was that this ace was a double-edged sword. My efforts alone wouldn't make a difference. However, I was sure that Alicia knew of this ace as well. I mean, she was the one who'd told Shuya in the anime, after all!

“That being said... This is all conjecture on my part.”

I had no solid proof. But... If Alicia was truly secluding herself, she couldn't make any preparations or summon any allies, so maybe I was just overthinking things in the end. Then again, Alicia would never shut herself away out of a despairing resignation about her future. I couldn't even imagine that. After all, obstacles never crushed Alicia—she was a girl who smashed them instead. Which was why I was rather desperate for information about Alicia's current status, but she was turning down all visitors, so...

“...No way, it's already bright outside?”

It seemed that morning had arrived unannounced while I lost myself in thought.

I asked Charlotte to deliver food to me. Today, I would ditch my classes. My shocking engagement was many levels more important

than classes right now, after all.

“Master Slowe... Maybe we should really pay a visit home first.”

I sighed. “I have the feeling that while we waste time with our return journey, they’d close off all my paths of escape. Who knows, I might even be married without my knowledge by the time I’ve arrived. If that is the alternative, I’d rather remain in Kirsch and cook up a scheme with Alicia.”

“But what are you even going to do...?”

“At any rate, Charlotte, could you please contact House Denning and tell them to ‘Stop messing with me’?”

One of Charlotte’s roles was to act as the bridge between me and House Denning. If I contacted my family directly, it’d be difficult for me to retain a calm and collected mind. With Charlotte as my proxy, I could reflect on myself rationally before doing anything.

“Ah, that reminds me... I heard a really weird rumor, Master Slowe.”

“A weird rumor? About me?”

“No...” Charlotte hesitated. “It’s not directly about you, but... Apparently, every night, Lady Alicia is meeting up with Shuya and discussing something with him. People are starting to speculate that those two might abandon their countries and elope...”

I choked on my tea.

“Are you all right?!” Charlotte asked worriedly.

“Those two? *Eloping*? Wow. That’s...fascinating.”

Yeah, those two were pretty close, I guess. In fact, it probably wouldn’t be an overstatement to say that Shuya was Alicia’s only friend among her peers—they were always seen as a pair. I supposed it wasn’t too far-fetched for people to suspect such a possibility after seeing the two together, considering the circumstances. *Hmm... Alicia choosing to meet up with Shuya after she shut herself away seems a little, well, thoughtless.*

At Kirsch, not many people came to mind when one thought about Alicia’s friends. In fact, the selection pool was probably tiny. And in this world, where the anime events hadn’t happened, Shuya was probably the only one who fit the description. *Ack, if someone accused me of being responsible for the fact that she has no friends, I couldn’t actually deny that... I feel my guilty conscience talking to me...*

There had actually been a few times when rumors had circulated about the princess of Cirquista dating a minor noble of Daryth. But if anyone actually knew them in person, they’d immediately realize that the rumors were all false. Considering all the chaos going on, however, I wouldn’t be surprised if some of the people spread that rumor out of pure amusement. What I did know for sure was that there was negative gossip about Alicia going around campus.

I recalled some of the whispers I'd heard.

"You know, Lady Alicia seemed to have been dumped once by Lord Denning, so I never thought she'd get intimate with House Denning again... Oh well, guess you can't expect anything less from a country that worked its way up through political marriages, I guess."

"They lunged at Lord Denning the moment he gained some fame. Honestly, Cirquista has, like, no restraint at all."

There was a chance that Alicia had chosen to seclude herself because she'd caught wind of these nasty rumors.

Now then, after I heard some very intriguing food for thought from Charlotte, I'd made up my mind. Were Shuya and Alicia going to elope? My answer to that too-good-to-be-true story was a big, fat, "no." However, they *did* seem to be planning something on the sly.

Don't underestimate me, Shuya. I was once the blackhearted Piggy Duke, ya know. I'm a man of my word, and I'm not afraid to see a plan through once I've decided on something.

The connections I'd made during my dark ages weren't things to be taken lightly. I detained a merchant that visited Kirsch regularly, and the first thing I did was slip bribe money into his hand.

"Young Master of House Denning! It has been a while, indeed! Are you sure that's all you want me to do? This is quite a hefty sum if keeping an eye on Shuya Newkern is the only job you have for me."

"Please consider it my compensation for not giving you any answers. I'm counting on you, okay?"

I'd bribed—no, *requested with compensation*—a merchant to monitor Shuya's movements. The rotund middle-aged man was one of the most influential figures in Yoram. There were thieves among his subordinates as well, and as long as I had this man's help, I would know Shuya's every last action in Yoram. *Hm? You're asking me whether I feel any guilt? Nah, how could I ever?*

And well, let's just say that it was super effective.

"Young Master of House Denning, oh my, it was such an easy job. You see—"

To gain intel about Shuya's movements inside Yoram, I used rather...*underhanded* means. I'd bribed a merchant and requested the guy to investigate on my behalf. And well, well. What a haul I had! Inside the carriage—which the merchant had used to travel to Kirsch—the merchant reported back to me about Shuya's daily activities during his stay in Yoram.

"Huh. So, he was looking for distinguished adventurers through the Adventurers' Guild, hm? Interesting. The name of the employer wasn't Shuya, but Alicia... I see, so they made a request for it to be a

special quest...”

Now then, what exactly had Shuya been up to? The merchant’s report answered that question perfectly.

“In fact, Young Master, the boy apparently said he was willing to fork over whatever amount of money needed for his quest.”

I paused. “Which means that Shuya isn’t doing this alone. Just as I thought. He doesn’t have that much money...”

The guy turned out to be on the search for renowned adventurers through the Adventurers’ Guild. What made it even more intriguing was the fact that he’d announced his unlimited budget to the guild receptionist.

The fact I was most curious about, though, was whether Shuya had named the dungeon he planned to explore, and I had an answer—Shuya *did* specify his destination: Demon Land in Cirquista. Exactly what I’d been expecting. Like I’d assumed, Alicia was indeed on the move.

“That boy claimed that he was willing to provide a detailed map of Demon Land during the expedition. That being said, imitations and fake maps of Demon Land flood just about every corner of the market, so I doubt that a high-ranking adventurer would accept his quest...” The man shook his head. “I must say, Demon Land of all places... What a fearsome choice.”

“Your findings are more than enough for me. I’ll handle the rest. Ah, I know I’m repeating myself, but a word of warning: it won’t end well for you if you poke your nose into unnecessary things a little too much.”

“Ha ha, I am rather terrified. In that case, that will be all from me.”

After the report, I hastened back to my room. I slumped onto my bed and began connecting the dots between the pieces of information I’d received.

First, Shuya had acted on Alicia’s request to do something in Yoram. Next, he’d gone to the Adventurers’ Guild and put in a request for them to scout out high-ranking adventurers. He’d commissioned a special quest that involved clearing a dungeon, and that dungeon in question was Demon Land. Then, he’d even told the guild that the employer was going to provide a useful, precise map for this expedition.

All that was left was waiting for a high-ranking adventurer to spot the quest in the guild and bite on the lure, but well... That was a question of luck.

I sighed. “Well, I’m pretty sure now that I have so much info. Still, jeez, Alicia... Couldn’t you have come to me for some advice or

help...? I'm more useful than Shuya, you know... Then again, this probably shows how desperate she is..."

In the Cirquistan royal family, contribution to the country was expected of all their members. If one were born a prince, they could give back to the country using their leadership or strength in combat, but most princesses ended up as pawns for political marriages. In the anime, though she hadn't ended up using it, Alicia had mentioned there was a last resort she could look to if her family forced her into an engagement.

In Demon Land, there were countless magic items that Cirquista and other great powers of the south would give anything to take back, because there was an inhuman collector who was obsessed with hoarding treasures. For there lived a downright crazy slime monster which had pillaged to its heart's content, earning the aggression of many powerful nations.

"So... You're serious about this, Alicia."

And like her, I hardened my resolve. I recalled what she'd said in the anime. She'd mentioned that there was something she'd taken with her from Cirquista in case the nightmare scenario ever happened. And yes, you've guessed it—a map of the Labyrinth of Cirquista, Demon Land.

And finally, the day had arrived. Alicia had sneaked off campus. Charlotte had apparently witnessed her leaving in the early hours of the morning.

"Master Slowe! Lady Alicia was alone!"

"Well done, Charlotte. Let's give chase immediately."

She was alone, which meant that she hadn't brought Shuya along with her. Surprising, I had to admit. She'd asked the guy to cooperate with her and act on her behalf in Yoram, but it seemed that in the end, she chose to make him stay out of her perilous adventure.

But at the same time, it also made sense. This likely meant that the two weren't so intimate that Shuya would be willing to put his life on the line for her yet. Personally, I was thankful for Shuya's absence. After all, I wouldn't have to worry about his nature as a magnet for unexpected trouble with his anime protagonist halo.

I took a deep breath. "Let's go, Charlotte."

"Yeah! We can't let Lady Alicia do this alone!"

"Exactly."

I'd told Charlotte beforehand that there was a chance that Alicia, out of her determination, would choose an extremely dangerous solution. And if this day truly did come around, I'd planned on accompanying Alicia on her journey.

It would be a dangerous one. Our destination was the Labyrinth of

Cirquista, one of the most devious places out there. But Charlotte had approved of my decision.

A majestic plot of uninhibited nature filled the area outside the grounds of Kirsch Mage Institute. Right now, Charlotte and I were trekking through this forest, minds set on making our way to our destination.

We'd departed from Kirsch in the wee hours of the morning. The air was fresh and invigorating, but unfortunately, my ability to enjoy it hadn't lasted too long.

Branches. Twigs. *Everywhere*. Pushing them aside with my own arm had gotten tedious very quickly, becoming a chore as I advanced on. The thing was, only the forest area immediately surrounding the campus had been cleared out for human traffic. After a few minutes of travel, one would wander into the vast, untouched forest.

"Master Slowe... Lady Alicia looks like she's in a lot of pain... Did something happen to her?"

"She's just out of shape."

Charlotte paused. "Will she notice that we're following her?"

"Don't worry. She'd probably never reach that conclusion, even in a thousand years."

But of course, it was better to be safe than sorry, so we distanced ourselves from Alicia, who was trudging on in the woods. The distance didn't pose much of an obstacle in terms of tailing her. She left traces *everywhere* she went, so it was little more than child's play. Frankly, like Shuya, Alicia was an amateur—neither of them even considered the possibility that someone was shadowing them.

Generally, if you were trying to maintain the shroud of secrecy, you'd conceal your trail as you progressed through a forest like this. But well, expecting such stealthy behavior from Alicia was perhaps a little too optimistic.

After a few hours of walking in the forest, I pushed aside some branches, and finally, I found the place in question.

"Let's stop for a moment, Charlotte. Alicia looks like she's going to meet up with someone."

"How strong would the adventurer she hired be?" Charlotte wondered.

"Who knows? Then again, they're willing to tackle that infamous dungeon, so it must be either a ridiculously burly man, or..."

We had come across an old, well-worn road. Where did it lead to? Neither of us knew. What we did see, however, was a carriage loaded with a mountain of baggage. On it was the mysterious silhouette of someone in a curious attire—likely an adventurer. Alicia exchanged a few words with the figure before making motions to step into the

carriage.

It was as good a moment as I was going to get. I led Charlotte through the thicket and revealed ourselves to them. "Hold it, Alicia. Just where do you think you're going?"

Alicia, who had one foot in the air as she prepared to hop in, widened her eyes and stared at us.

Chapter 2: Journey to the Labyrinth of Cirquista

Alicia's destination was the Labyrinth of Cirquista, and this trip had to be done in secret. After all, how could a princess head towards such a hazardous place of her own accord? Thus, it made sense that Alicia had chosen an obscure area deep in the forest as her meeting place.

"Lady Alicia. You did not inform me that you would bring companions."

The speaker was gently stroking the head of the towering monster that was fastened to the carriage. White bandages obscured most of their face, and I couldn't distinguish their gender. They had golden hair, fair skin, and eyes of emerald green. As they fixed their eyes upon us, their hand silently moved towards the sword at their hip.

"I'm also surprised, Blau. I never thought someone would follow me."

"Shall I...exterminate them?"

Sheesh, what a bloodcurdling conversation.

The person wrapped in a mysterious outfit stepped forward, shielding Alicia behind them. So *this* was the adventurer Alicia had hired for her expedition into the Labyrinth of Cirquista. They had been shaken for a moment when we'd first appeared, but the adventurer then collected themselves immediately. *They're skilled. And experienced*, I observed. One might miss it at first sight, but the adventurer had numerous magic items equipped on their body. *A magic item user, hm?*

I was pretty sure of their identity by now, but just in case, I asked, "Alicia, who is that?"

"Someone I hired because I needed to."

"Judging by appearance... A high-ranking adventurer who would cost a fortune to hire, right? Huh, I didn't know you were that rich."

"Well, yeah. I spent everything I owned."

"I heard you locked yourself away in your room the whole time. How did you even establish contact? Did you make someone go to the guild on your behalf? Let's see... For example, your trusty friend Shuya would be rather convenient."

Alicia looked sullen. She showed an obvious reaction to Shuya's name. Charlotte, meanwhile, tugged on my clothes anxiously. *It's*

okay, Charlotte. I'm not here to argue with Alicia. In fact, it's quite the opposite.

"Don't play word games with me, Slowe. We've got something urgent to attend to, so I don't have time to dally around here."

"Alicia, could you take us with you? I'm sure we'll come in handy."

Those words must have thrown her for a loop, because Alicia blinked several times and let out a slow, "Huh?"

Just to put it out there—in the end, Alicia allowed me and Charlotte to join her. Without much of a fuss, actually, which was surprising. The adventurer Alicia had hired didn't protest either, stating that her client's opinion was what counted.

"You've got quite a bit of luggage there," I said, raising an eyebrow.

Alicia shrugged. "According to that Blau person, we'll have to travel ten days by carriage, so we'll need at least this much. And since we have even more people now, we'll need to be economical about it."

I was honestly taken aback by how easily Alicia had caved. Then again, Alicia's destination was a dungeon—not just any dungeon either, but the infamous Labyrinth of Cirquista. If I had to guess, she probably felt anxious about having only one adventurer in her party.

The carriage rocked and rattled as we carried on, jolting from time to time as it ran over pebbles in the road. Curtains lined every window of the carriage and blocked all light out, and though it was still daytime, it was nearly pitch-black within its walls. The journey was the furthest thing from comfortable. *Well, I didn't come along looking for a vacation, so I can't complain.*

Inside the carriage were dozens of boxes stuffed to the brim with food and other adventurers' necessities. There was a great variety in these supplies—it would have lasted the two of them several weeks had Charlotte and I not come along.

I could hear Charlotte's steady breathing as she lay sound asleep beside me. I'd asked her to stand guard in the girls' dorm to keep an eye out for Alicia's departure. It was a rather taxing task, and I felt bad about asking it of Charlotte, but if I'd tried to sneak into the girls' dorm, I'd have been treated like a criminal...

Alicia, meanwhile, was silent as she sat right across me, deep in thought. *She probably has a ton of things on her mind.*

I decided to ask Alicia a few questions while I had time. The most important thing about the start of a journey was always information, especially catching up to the current situation. However, there was one pressing question I had to ask first.

"Do you really think that adventurer is trustworthy, Alicia? She's probably quite the skilled monster tamer."

We traveled by what ostensibly should have been a single horse-drawn carriage. Considering the size of our carriage and how many passengers there were, the carriage would at least need two young, fit horses. But the horses that you'd expect to see were nowhere in sight—a *monster* was bridled up and rigged to the carriage, tugging us along.

"She seems to be. But, well... Yes, I do trust her."

"Because the guild introduced her to you? Is that why?"

"That's not really the only reason I have. The only thing I can tell you is that there was something about her that won my trust. What, you're not happy with that?"

I paused. "So you're not going to tell me the details, huh? I've gotta say, though, that monster gave me a surprise."

After our discussion with Alicia had ended in her agreement, Charlotte and I had approached the carriage—and that was when *that* thing had come into view. A gigantic monster had pushed itself through the trees, appearing in all its glory.

Emotionless eyes, black like obsidian, had fixed their gaze on us. It was a predator that sat at the top of the food chain, dwarfing even the formidable threat that humans posed to those beneath them. Its colossal frame towered over even a standard residential dwelling, and its claws clacked menacingly against the stones that littered the ground as its eight enormous legs lifted its grotesque form.

In my mind, I'd sifted through monsters that shared similar traits in appearance and had narrowed it down to one species—the giant orb-weaver spider, Arachnidarus.

I snapped back to the present and muttered, "Alicia, that monster's strong. Much stronger than you think."

"Really? Isn't it just a big spider?"

"They're called nomadic spiders—grueling roads don't pose even the slightest problem to them, and their stamina is practically through the roof. To be blunt, you couldn't find a monster more suitable for our needs right now if you tried."

Alicia hummed. "That just means I hired a truly competent adventurer."

I'd only known the monster by name. They'd weave webs and wait for prey to fall in like normal spiders, but the Arachnidarus didn't settle down in one place. They were aggressive and fearless, traits that made them dangerous. So I had a hard time believing that a monster tamer could actually order one around. Usually, you'd only find such creatures in the depths of a dungeon.

I shook my head. "I'm honestly impressed you managed to hire such an exceptional monster tamer."

"Yeah... I really lucked out."

I'd reached for my wand in response to the approaching giant, but I'd quickly discovered that I had nothing to worry about once I spotted the collar on its neck. Monster tamers used those collars to indicate that the monsters they tamed were harmless to humans.

"You really did. Some people actually think that the number of monster tamers a country can assemble is what truly determines their might. That adventurer doesn't seem to be the type who brainwashes monsters through drugs or potions, which makes her even more invaluable."

She seemed to be the type that tamed monsters through building a foundation of trust. Most mages, if not all of them, molded monsters to their liking using potions. Only a person of exceptional ability would be able to form a genuine bond with a monster like she had. In fact, most humans wouldn't even want to approach a monster like that, let alone tame one.

Alicia next broke the silence with a mutter. "This thing is shaking a lot."

"Well, a monster's pulling us along. You can't expect it to be considerate about giving us a smooth ride."

We were currently hurtling down a nearly untamed wilderness at an absurd speed. Blau, the subject of our conversation, sat at the front of the carriage with reins in hand, giving directions to the spider. I could see how the Arachnidarus had earned its reputation for being able to so easily traverse rugged terrain. So what if there wasn't a path before it? It could just spit out acid from its mouth and make one. Nothing could stop this tyrant; it was a stunning sight to behold.

"Anyway, Slowe. How did you figure out what my plans were?"

"I had someone tail Shuya. It didn't take long before I learned that he was looking for adventurers through Yoram's guild."

"That moron... 'Leave it to me,' he said. Hah, he leaked information like a run-down boat."

To be fair, it wasn't Shuya's fault. The merchant I'd hired was just that exceptional. Members of House Denning were taught ways to shake off our pursuers and hide our trails as a part of our education, but Shuya was from a different upbringing. Alicia probably was aware of that as well—her only reaction had been a long sigh.

She continued, "I'm sure this is a pointless question, but just in case, Slowe. Do you know where I'm going?"

"I sure do. You're heading to one of the areas in the central levels of the Labyrinth of Cirquista—Demon's Rise, otherwise known as the Demon's Ebony Sword, right?"

"How much do you even know?" She sounded aghast. "Even Shuya shouldn't know that detail. The only thing he received was the paper with the quest details that I'd written."

“I did some in-depth digging into the quest you commissioned at the guild.”

Alicia shook her head. “I can’t believe what I’m hearing. That’s a *crime*, and you know it. Don’t even deny it. Did the guild let that information slip?”

“Oh, it’s not a big deal. Just think of it this way: I’m not called Denning for nothing, and I have my connections. Cut the crap, Alicia. You plan to retrieve the Binary Wand that the slime snatched from Daryth, don’t you?”

To my surprise, Alicia nodded. *Huh, I thought she’d be a bit more reluctant. That’s a surprise.*

She replied, “If our betrothal exists to strengthen the alliance between Daryth and Cirquista, taking back the Binary Wand would be more than enough to serve the same purpose. As long as we have that thing in our possession, our engagement will disappear without a single trace.”

“You make it sound easy. Do you even know how hard that is?”

“That’s why I scouted for adventurers who had actual field experience inside the Labyrinth of Cirquista. Plus. I have this.” Alicia took out a book and showed it to me.

Cirquista had numerous dungeons, and the amount of information that country held about dungeons could rival that of the Adventurers’ Guild. There were even rumors that their information about Demon Land, in particular, exceeded anything the guild had on record.

That nation’s history could be summed up in one sentence: a long, ongoing war with dungeons. Among adventurers, a certain rumor had slowly gained popularity that the higher-ups had a detailed map of that infamous labyrinth—a record of the history of Demon Land that must’ve been kept under lock and key for safekeeping.

The book Alicia held had a black spine. There was a bloodcurdling aura to it, and my intuition told me that it *must* be what I was suspecting.

She muttered, “I’m not going to show you the contents, by the way. This is *technically* a national treasure and all...”

My eyes were glued to the item. It was a priceless treasure trove filled with information about the labyrinth. Frankly, I was itching to snatch it away from Alicia and take a greedy look.

She continued, “So yeah, this map is a trump card, but I think that I got really lucky with Blau, as well. After all, she apparently knows an entrance to the labyrinth that isn’t any of the established routes.”

“...For real?”

If Alicia was right, that was crazy news. Usually, the guild would manage all entrances to a dungeon and do what they could to keep tabs on adventurers. Information about entrances not under the guild’s

watchful eyes was an extremely rare and precious opportunity—to an extent that people would even kill for it.

The carriage rattled on.

After I'd gotten a glimpse at Alicia's goal and her means to get to the central levels, this time, Alicia began chucking questions at me.

"Hey, I've been itching to ask you this, but what's your stance on this, Slowe?"

"My stance on what?"

"If you tag along, they'll force the responsibility on you." For some reason, Alicia's speech faltered. "When House Denning learns that you went to the Labyrinth of Cirquista, it'll be...problematic. Are you *sure* about this? Your father would never approve, from what I know about him."

"Don't remind me. I'm trying my best to avoid thinking about that... Well, at least I know that a knuckle sandwich wouldn't suffice."

"After Uncle Louis went missing there, there was a ban in your household about exploring dungeons, wasn't there?"

My eyes widened a fraction. "I'm surprised you know that."

"Well, it's a matter concerning the family of my former fiancé, so..." She shrugged.

My father scowled whenever a Denning member went on a dungeon expedition that wasn't for training purposes. In his eyes, gaining money or items through dungeons was the job of adventurers, and it was unbecoming of House Denning to be involved in such an act. The Labyrinth of Cirquista was especially taboo among his disdain for dungeons, because his brother—my uncle—had gone missing inside it.

"Well, I've yet to come up with a method to rein you in when you've got your heart set on something, which is why I'm here."

Alicia offered no reply.

Alicia, a Cirquistan princess, was personally heading into Demon Land. The implications of that were unimaginable. Not that long ago, Shuya and Alicia had gone to Zenelaus of their own accord, and Alicia had apparently earned a terrible scolding for it. This time, it wouldn't stop at that, however, because it was the *Labyrinth of Cirquista* we were talking about.

"You're a Denning," she finally said. "I'm sure that you, of all people, would know what it means to go to Demon Land with me..."

It was completely different from nearly being dragged into a large-scale conflict by pure chance during that trip to the Dungeon City. I was heading to the dungeon with Alicia, fully aware of how dangerous it was.

Alicia continued, "Slowe, right now, we aren't even fiancés or

anything special. We're just classmates. Nothing more, nothing less. Are you aware of that...?"

This would definitely escalate into an international incident. I could hear the rumors now; *Slowe Denning didn't stop the Cirquistan princess from going to Demon Land—he even accompanied her!* I'd be put in a rough position. But when Alicia was determined, I didn't know how to stop her. Thus, cooperating with her was much better than my alternatives.

Alicia muttered, "If you help me too much... You'll live to regret it."

"You're right. We're just classmates, that's all. We didn't actively interact with each other at Kirsch either, and it's not like we're really close, unlike you and Shuya. But, and I repeat, no matter how much time I put into it, I dunno how to stop you when you want to do something. I suppose that's the only semblance of a reason I can give you. Anyone else in my shoes would probably at least try to stop you, but, well, yeah. I can't do it." I raised my hands in surrender.

She stared at me incredulously. "At worst... You could even be kicked out of House Denning."

"That'd be perfect, actually. I often find that the ways of House Denning don't sit well with me."

There was worry on her face. It wasn't unfounded. The dark, bitter history between the Labyrinth of Cirquista and House Denning ran deep.

Suddenly, Alicia and I both let out a yelp in chorus. The carriage wheels must have run over something big, because the carriage jolted violently.

For a while, there was only silence between us. Then, a pleasant fragrance that seemed completely out of place tickled my nose. The carriage stopped moving.

The door opened as Blau made an appearance. "I want to give my little one some rest. I suggest having lunch during this break," she said.

According to her, though time was of the essence, that spider would get stressed if we didn't give it regular rest.

There were loads and loads of food piled up inside the carriage. Blau started a fire on the side of the road and promptly began cooking. Charlotte had offered to help, but Blau had turned down all offers of aid, saying that it was her job. However, Charlotte stubbornly insisted on helping, because at this rate, she wouldn't be able to contribute at all during our journey. In the end, Blau caved.

"Now then..." After I'd had a light meal, I turned towards Blau, who sat next to that giant spider. We'd be going into a dungeon

together as a party after we arrived, so it was vital that I got a feel for her character.

During our travels on the carriage, Blau was mostly going to be handling the reins, so she'd keep a lookout and attend to the spider.

I had the feeling that neither Blau nor I had a good first impression of each other. *I need to deal with that as soon as possible and take this chance to talk to her right now.*

With that in mind, I approached, but she was the one who called out to me. "Your compassion for your friend is admirable. Do you even know where we are heading to?"

Blau's gaze towards me was different from when she looked at her spider—it was sharp and scrutinizing. But I honestly couldn't blame her—my attitude was the same.

"I'll throw that question right back at you. Why did you accept such a risky job? Alicia's target is the Labyrinth of Cirquista. As a high-ranking adventurer, I'm sure that you should know that you're essentially walking into death."

"Lady Alicia's goal is inside the central levels and no further. I have experience down to those depths."

"Doesn't change the fact it's dangerous. After all is said and done, Alicia isn't a professional in this line of work. You can't expect her to contribute anything to the dungeon expedition. I'm sure that you had a party with you when you made it into the central levels, right? The circumstances will be completely different this time around."

A party of high-ranking adventurers going into a dungeon was nothing like taking an amateur along. I was sure that Blau understood that as well. The difficulty of having someone who was frankly baggage would only raise the difficulty to insanity.

She paused, aura sharpening. "Don't mince your words. You can't trust me—that is what you are trying to say, isn't it?"

"I'm not going that far. I only want to know what kind of person this oh-so-high-and-mighty, high-ranking adventurer is. I want to prune out as much danger as I can from Alicia's vicinity, that's all."

"Unnecessary guessing games are a waste of my time. Lady Alicia's map was attractive to me, and I accepted the special quest. That is it."

The map Alicia had was now in Blau's hands. She'd claimed that during our travels, she'd peruse the labyrinth's map thoroughly and strategize. This map could probably only demonstrate its true value in the hands of a high-ranking adventurer that knew the labyrinth very well.

She continued, "I am not after money. This is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. With this map in hand, I will go to the central levels. There is a reason I must go, and the quest suited my needs."

I hadn't been able to gain details about that through the guild, but Alicia had deemed her a trustworthy person. I was choosing to place faith in her judgment—that didn't mean I trusted Blau, however. Having said that, this journey would decide Alicia's future. Though there wasn't any evidence to back me up, I was willing to believe that Alicia wouldn't make a rash decision.

"I have the recognition of the Adventurers' Guild. I am confident that I can perform better inside a dungeon than anyone else. At least, I will be more useful than a certain Dragon Slayer of Daryth."

Huh. She knows who I am. I haven't introduced myself yet, though.

But before I could return with a snide remark of my own, Blau changed the topic. "That aside, your retainer is quite responsible and respectable. Wanting to help me, huh...?" She shook her head slowly. "In the end, I lost to her insistence. How could such a girl be devoted towards a person of *your* character? What cheap tricks did you play?"

"Wow. You don't seem to like me much, do you?"

"She seems to be out of her depth on an expedition to the labyrinth, but I must say, she is too good to be your retainer."

This lady was definitely hostile towards me. *Did I slight her in some way before? No, that can't be. I've never met her before. I'd never forget such a memorable adventurer.*

She raised an eyebrow. "Don't tell me you were unaware of how far your reputation goes. Your behavior is so notorious that even adventurers like me would hear your rumors in passing."

I see. So this person's one of those types—someone who scorns me. I'd been a nuisance to many people throughout my life. Her strong hostility towards me meant that she was likely one of the people who had been extremely inconvenienced when I'd become a human orc.

"Don't be too paranoid. I have gone out of my way to talk to you right now because I wanted to know why the infamous Slowe Denning has gone through such a drastic transformation."

Finally, I spoke up. "In that case, what kind of person did you assume I was?"

"I would prefer to avoid saying it to your face, I am afraid. My impression of you was horrid, to put it mildly. You would not be happy hearing it either."

The first day of our journey on the carriage ended without incident. When night fell, the giant spider stopped moving, for it had to sleep too. We were finally released from the turbulence of the road.

I borrowed a pile of blankets and constructed a makeshift bed on the floor. Alicia and Charlotte lay down with me in the middle. They had cushions that served as pillows—you could tell the difference between the service provided to them versus me. *That adventurer is*

making her bias very clear!

In the background, Charlotte's breathing evened out as she fell sound asleep.

Alicia muttered, "Slowe, are you awake?"

I kept my eyes fixed on the pitch-black ceiling as I replied, "Yeah. What is it?"

"I know I should've said this earlier, but what were you thinking when you chose to bring Miss Charlotte along? You knew where I was going! Wait, surely you aren't thinking about taking her into the dungeon, are you?"

"That was my plan. What, you've got something to say about it?"

"...I can't believe this. I have a map, sure, but the only advantage it'll give us is showing us the shortest path to our destination. The dungeon is still just as dangerous, you know?"

She didn't have to spell it out for me. I'd explained the same thing to Charlotte beforehand, and she already knew how perilous the place was. Charlotte, however, still came along, saying that she wanted to help Alicia in whatever way she could.

After hearing what I had to say, Alicia, from her position on the ground, stared over at Charlotte, who was wrapped up in a blanket.

I muttered, "Don't forget that Charlotte's my retainer. Plus, when push comes to shove, she can change the tides of the battle too."

"Who did you hear that from, huh?"

"I made that conclusion. Charlotte also has an ace up her sleeve. After all, she's *my* retainer."

"I repeat, I can't believe this... Where did you even get that confidence from?"

Doubt was clear in Alicia's eyes. I couldn't blame her, honestly. Just like Alicia, Blau had also noticed that Charlotte's abilities were inferior to the average mage. However, a certain guy sleeping next to her pillow made up for that. Yes, *that* guy. The black, standoffish cat. Even after discovering their identity, Charlotte still thought they were cute, and sometimes I questioned her taste.

Alicia shook her head. "She's even brought her pet along... He's cute, but he better pray that monster doesn't eat him."

"...Don't jinx it."

In truth, it wasn't Charlotte that we'd depend on in an emergency, it was that pet she kept feeling sorry for. If anyone was going to be eaten, it'd probably be that spider. *Welp, surely the Great Spirit wouldn't try to eat such a spooky spider, though.*

Day in and day out, we spent our time inside the carriage. If boredom could kill, we'd have died many times over. It'd be nice if that adventurer shared a few heroic tales to spice it up a little, but it

seemed that she wasn't overly passionate about going out of her way for her clients. She stayed in the driver's seat the entire time when we were on the move, carefully scrutinizing Alicia's map.

But somehow, we didn't *actually* die of boredom, and we owed thanks to Charlotte.

"Lady Alicia, just wondering... You have had many betrothal candidates so far, right? What kind of people did you get the most?"

"I...can't really give you the details because this involves more than me alone. Are you curious, Miss Charlotte?"

If the team had only been me, Alicia, and that aloof adventurer, conversations would wilt in an instant. But Charlotte was the kind of girl that bridged the gap between us all despite our differences.

"I just got curious. You're a princess from a powerful country, and I was wondering what kind of people they'd introduce you to."

"I get where you're coming from, but... Okay, I shouldn't say this, but my pool of candidates was basically a trash can."

"Whaaat?! Really?!"

Charlotte fired off one question after another about a matter that also somewhat piqued my interest. To be honest, this alone already made me thank my past self for deciding to bring Charlotte along. I continued feigning sleep and disinterest while straining my ears. It seemed that Alicia was spoiled for choice in terms of candidates.

Hesitantly, Charlotte asked, "Then... What kind of guy do you like, Lady Alicia?"

Good one, Charlotte! I was also interested in this topic. In the anime, Alicia had ended up with Shuya, but she hadn't even seen him as a man in the beginning. *I-It's not like I'm curious or anything. But I guess there's no harm in learning that information since I'm probably going to continue interacting with Alicia in the future.*

"The kind of guy I like?" She paused. "I haven't fallen in love with anyone until now, so how would I know?"

That was so depressing.

"Th-Then, how about the kind of personality you like?! Is there anyone in Kirsch that would make you go, 'I choose you!' if you had to pick?"

"Personality? Hmm. A bright and energetic person, I guess. Oh, maybe you'd remember, Miss Charlotte. Wasn't there a man like that in House Denning in the past? Lord Louis?"

I had to stop myself from snorting in shock. *Phew, that was close.* I'd heard an unexpected name and had nearly exposed myself on reflex. *Louis... Seriously?* It was the name of my uncle.

He'd made a name for himself as an adventurer before anyone had realized, and in the end, he'd gone missing inside the Labyrinth of Cirquista. He'd been an eccentric guy who'd cast House Denning aside

to become an adventurer, as well as the cause of my father's loathing towards dungeons. *Wait a minute... How do they even know each other? I can't recall any interactions between them.*

Alicia stammered, "Y-Your turn, Miss Charlotte. Tell me about the, well, kind of person you like. It's not fair that I'm the only one spilling information..."

I continued to pretend to be asleep, but slowly, actual drowsiness settled in, and the next thing I knew, I'd fallen fast asleep while listening to the girls talk in the background.

That night, I paid the price for taking a nap during the day. I didn't feel sleepy at all now.

"Oink..." I snorted dejectedly.

At times like these, the only thing I could do was brood. Naturally, the topic this time would be the dungeon we were advancing towards.

I let out a small snort, deep in thought. The Labyrinth of Cirquista, in a sense, was a living record of the entire history of southern adventurers. Riches, fame, and treasures untold were all hidden inside it. In fact, it wasn't just adventurers who'd been mesmerized by this dungeon—even many direct descendants of House Denning were obsessed.

"...Master Slowe, Master Slowe... Are you awake?"

Unlike yesterday, it was Charlotte who nudged me to talk tonight.

"Sure am, Charlotte."

"When I talked with Lady Alicia today, she brought up Lord Louis. Do you remember him?"

I hesitated. "Considering how...*intense* he was, I could hardly forget him."

"I...recalled a little about him."

Louis Denning was the least Denning-like person in the entire household. But thinking about him now was meaningless, because he'd disappeared in that infamous labyrinth.

Charlotte paused. "Master Slowe, is it true that Lord Louis would've become the family head if he hadn't become an adventurer?"

"That's...true. My father was more sensible in terms of character, but Louis was more powerful and charismatic. I can't think of anyone else who was so loved by our people."

My father, Balderoy Denning, was the current head of House Denning. He was a conservative man in every sense of the word, but his brother had chosen the path of an adventurer and had likely met an untimely end in the labyrinth. Which meant that it was simply out of the question for members of House Denning to go there.

"During a break today, Miss Blau actually mentioned that the

deceased roam about the Labyrinth of Cirquista. She said that some adventurers turn undead after they die there, and some of them even retain memories of their human life.”

“Well, anything can happen in a dungeon... But Charlotte, that’s just yet another one of those folk tales they tell to trick children into behaving.”

“Yeah, I figured...”

After that, there was silence. Perhaps Charlotte had fallen asleep.

This night turned out to be full of surprises. The topic of Louis, for one. But more importantly, I was shocked that Charlotte had gotten so friendly with *Blau* that they’d engage in small talk.

“Wheeew.”

Traveling on a carriage meant that every single part of my body ached afterwards. The giant spider monster that pulled the carriage seemed to be prioritizing speed above all else, and thanks to that, the carriage would actually be thrown into the air from time to time. And the shaking was just as bad. I’d be minding my own business as I sat one moment, and in the next, my head would crash against the walls. That happened pretty often.

“Oioioink.”

Thus, doing stretches was critical whenever we stopped for breaks. I’d work out all the soreness in my muscles.

“Oiiink.”

That aside, that monster has some ridiculous horsepower, I gotta say. The path we advanced through was completely out of repair, perhaps even worse. Despite that fact, that monster easily covered distances several times more than what horses were capable of. I could see why people were theorizing that in a few years, wars between nations would be decided by monster tamers who had powerful monsters under their belt.

My ears perked up as a familiar voice rang out.

“Lady Alicia, please eat this.”

“This is really yucky, I’d rather not...”

I was able to somehow withstand the hellish carriage journey, but Alicia, who was born and raised as a princess, must have found it torturous. I honestly admired her endurance. She’d already spent several days inside that turbulent carriage.

Hm, but wait. Thinking back, when Alicia and Shuya headed to Zenelaus, she managed to cross the forest area of the Huzak ruins that was overrun with monsters. On foot, no less. Compared to that, a shaky carriage journey probably isn’t much, huh?

I joined the conversation. “If you’re not going to have that, Alicia, I could eat it in your stead.”

Blau replied, sounding displeased. “Well, that was sudden. Slowe Denning, you have already eaten enough for two. You *still* want food...?”

Charlotte puffed out her chest. “Miss Blau, Master Slowe wouldn’t be satisfied by the likes of two portions!”

“Young lady... That...isn’t something to be proud of.”

There was a problem. It didn’t seem to affect the two girls, and that was great, but I was very troubled.

The incident would happen at night.

“Zzz...”

They slept soundly. But I came to a realization that I probably shouldn’t have.

...How am I supposed to sleep in this situation?!



Allow me to break down the situation. Two girls were next to me. Two girls that were renowned for their beauty at school. *I know that it sounds bad coming from me, but I'm a teenage boy!*

In addition, one of the girls was an exchange student from Cirquista, who was supposed to be on campus. Alicia was wrapped up snugly in a blanket and sleeping away peacefully. She had a gigantic male following at Kirsch, and whenever people saw her nodding off during class, they'd compare her to a fairy. And at the moment, this stunningly beautiful girl was even technically my fiancée.

She was the heroine of the anime—a princess of action who'd accomplish anything she set her mind to, and sometimes even do unprecedented things if that was what it took. Like Shuya, she was sincere and virtuous, and her heart held a kindness that couldn't be hidden.

I stared at her in silence. She was sleeping with a cherubic face. I couldn't blame the guys at school for cursing me about how I'd lucked out with so many cute girls in my vicinity.

But. My heart already belonged to someone else, through and through.

Sleep didn't seem to be settling in at all, so I decided to go outside and cool down in the chilly evening breeze. I stepped down from the carriage quietly so that I wouldn't wake the two, and I was greeted with darkness everywhere.

“...Are you not going to sleep?”

And in that darkness was that renowned adventurer whom the guild had referred to Alicia.

She continued without waiting for me to reply. “My client is sleeping. It is my duty to keep watch, just like this. If I want to rest, I have plenty of time during the day.”

She didn't seem affected by the evening's chill at all. I, meanwhile, was wrapped up in a very warm blanket.

I manifested fire on the tip of a branch that'd fallen onto the ground. It would likely last the night and provide a measure of warmth to us both.

When I handed it over, Blau seemed taken aback. “Mages...are rather convenient, I see,” she muttered as she accepted it. She observed the fire I'd created with fascination.

Charlotte seemed to be slowly closing the distance with this adventurer through conversations, but that wasn't the case for me. I was still a little wary of the woman. It stemmed from the day I'd met her—I had the feeling that she knew about me.

“Speaking of which, I heard about you from her.”

“Her?”

“That retainer. At noon today, when you did that odd exercise, I went up to her and asked what had happened to you—and why you changed to a decent human being.”

“Why would you do *that*?”

“My job is to bring Lady Alicia to the place she specified. Don’t you agree that my duties would include getting a feel for our traveling companions?”

Wow. Shameless, much?

She stroked the frame of the towering spider as she whispered, “And she gave me an answer. According to her, you must have shouldered a burden that was too much for a single person.”

“...And? What are you going to do with that information?”

“Nothing. Why would I want to know about the anguish of a member of House Denning? But I suppose I did gain some rather valuable information—learning that even the renowned Slowe Denning is merely human.”

I paused. “In that case, I have something I want to ask you too. That monster of yours... How did you even tame it?”

This spider was a type of monster that’d only be found inside the depths of a dungeon. Keeping such a monster in check was impossible for a human.

“You know that I cannot answer that question.” She paused. “But you still chose to ask. Only a nasty person would do that, don’t you agree?”

Well, I expected that. A monster tamer could never let on her trade secrets that easily.

A few monotonous days passed by until, at last, Blau told us that we’d arrived at the border of Cirquista.

“*O flame, ignite, oink.*” I used fire magic to light the twigs we’d gathered. The flame on the kindling spat out cinders that crackled and flew into the night sky.

Along the border, we’d found a lake that sat deep within a forest that was quite some distance from the big road, and we’d decided it would suit our needs and made camp there for the night. Not that many days had passed, and I struggled to contain my surprise that we’d reached the border already. “Fast” wasn’t enough to describe that monster—*though we pay the price for that in terms of comfort.*

“Aaah... I’m starving, oink.” I whimpered as I shivered. It was a chilly night.

It was around the time of year that the color of winter took over the warm hues of autumn—the seasons were changing.

Blau had caught some fish, and I took on the task of grilling them. The shelf-stable food stored inside the carriage would’ve done the job

too, but that food couldn't compare with the taste of freshly caught fish. Impatience prickled at me as I waited for the fish to cook. I continued to skewer Blau's fish and tossed those over the blazing campfire, along with meat kebabs.

"Gotta put in more. More, *more*. I'm hungry, oink."

Charlotte and Alicia had gone off to draw water while I was busy cooking our dinner. *I call it 'cooking,' but all I'm doing is grilling them until they're cooked through.*

I let out a lengthy exhale, admiring my work.

A simple way to describe Alicia's homeland was a nation blessed with plentiful water resources. Unlike other major nations in the south, Cirquista had many massive bodies of water of the highest quality. The lives of the Cirquistans were heavily intertwined with these vast bodies of water, and I'd even heard that the people always had a custom of founding cities near large lakes and such.

Fresh fish, therefore, was always readily available, and I envied them a lot for that. After all, having a diet that only consisted of meat led to unbalanced nutrition, which, well, led to obesity.

Time ticked by, and the next thing I knew, the many meat kebabs I was grilling were sizzling and dripping juice.

"Any time now," I muttered.

Blau had prepared a hefty amount of grub in advance. We didn't know how many days we'd stay inside the dungeon, so consuming as much as we could before we arrived was probably the best idea to prevent waste.

"Hmm..." I frowned as I sensed someone's gaze on me. I was being watched. The watchers seemed to lurk inside the forest. Their gazes felt greedy, envious. *Humans.*

They weren't anyone worthy of note, however, since I could detect them from this distance. I decided I'd let them be for now.



There was an unfortunate common factor among national borders: thugs loitered around no matter which nation you were in. If one were to travel to another nation through official means, they'd need to pay tax and prepare identification documents. Thus, there were always people who'd turn to illegal routes to travel between countries instead.

There was a lot of variety among these illegal migrants. Some were merchants, some were wanted criminals chased out of their nation, some were nobles who'd fallen from grace, some were commoners wanting a fresh start somewhere else, and so on and so forth. Needless to say, there were many criminal groups lurking

around borders, seeking a chance to rob these people who weren't all that innocent either.

A few dozen men dotted the shadowy forest. There was no uniformity in their style of fashion, but there was one common denominator—they all wore black that provided them cover under the shadow of darkness.

One man yelled, "I dunno why nobles took this kinda carriage, but we outnumber them like mad! We can't let this chance slip by! Right, y'all?!"

Apparently, the carriage that boy and the girls rode in was quite a fine one. It wasn't unnecessarily adorned with garish ornaments, but instead was of a sturdy build that could withstand the force of that giant spider. Furthermore, only people above a certain social standing could make use of such a monster, which meant that there were likely treasures they could only dream of hidden inside that carriage. At least, that was what these bandits thought, anyway.

"Boss! We've started scent-marking the nearby area! The monster horde is slowly advancing towards our target!"

Hearing the report of his subordinate, the man who led them all, Monster Tamer Gokhan, gave a languid nod. They'd only survived this long as a bandit gang because of their thorough and careful target selection practices, picking targets that they had absolute confidence against. They chose targets greatly outnumbered by their own forces—when it was clear that they could easily overwhelm those witless enough to be caught unawares by brute force alone.

Travelers who tried to cross the border through illegal routes tended to have discrepancies between their appearance and their actual assets. Even if they seemed ragged, there was a chance that they hid a marvelous wealth. Naturally, this meant that there was also the possibility that there were powerful warriors disguised with rags.

To this date, this gang assessed their opponents with a keen eye and evaded death by living modestly. But this wasn't their only strength—their boss, Gokhan, was a monster tamer.

"The monsters under the boss's control are gonna arrive soon. Boss plans on dispatching every last monster for our raid this time! Take care and don't get caught up inside the monster horde!"

With a monster tamer at the helm, this bandit gang had settled into a routine. The monsters under Gokhan's control would first cause mayhem and rattle their victims. Those who took pride in their combat abilities would then attack, and the rest of the gang would snatch away the goods.

For all the reasons above, everyone had been shocked at who Gokhan chose to target this time. After all, that spider was clearly a fearsome opponent.

One lackey asked in a respectful tone, “Boss, would it be possible for you to take control of that monster? If we had such a powerful monster on our side, we could expand our influence even further.”

With one look, Gokhan had recognized the monster that accompanied the group of youngsters. It was an Arachnidarus—a lethal predator that lurked inside the deepest layers of dungeons. Such a monster would never be found in the wilds near the border of Cirquista. It’d been the first time even Gokhan had laid eyes on such a monster, but he’d read about its distinguishing traits in books. From what he could remember, that particular type of monster lived the life of a nomad, never settling down in one place.

After a moment of consideration, Gokhan muttered, “Not a bad idea at all. Onto serious business now. On the signal of my magic flute, like always, all my monsters will attack at once.”

Each monster tamer had their own unique ways of taming monsters. Some sought out monsters newly born into this world and nurtured the bonds of trust over time. These monsters would voluntarily obey the orders of their tamers. Other tamers, however, would administer special potions to monsters, forcefully bending these creatures to their will.

Gokhan happened to be the latter, the most common type of monster tamer. Though his taming style was unremarkable, he was a very talented man, for he could control numerous monsters at once.

“Boss! We’ve finished spreading the bait! Many monsters inside the forest have already started marching!”

Gokhan nodded, satisfied. “Good work. You know what to do next—distance yourselves. It’ll start at any moment now.”

What gave Gokhan an edge over ordinary monster tamers was likely his profound understanding of the habits of the monsters that lurked within the forest. He knew the types of food that the monsters liked, as well as the range of their territory, like the back of his hand. He’d taken his time to train these monsters by scattering addictive baits among the trees. The monsters, having grown used to this bait, would immediately assemble whenever they detected the distinctive scent of it.

That being said, no matter how powerful he was as an individual, one couldn’t make ends meet alone in the world of banditry. There was a limit to the scope of crimes a single person could accomplish. Gokhan had experienced the harsh life of an adventurer, so naturally he understood that fact very well.

Assembling comrades hadn’t been a difficult task with Gokhan’s special abilities on the table. Many of the people that wandered into such a forest came from complicated backgrounds with nowhere to go, and whenever Gokhan showed off the monsters he’d tamed, these

people readily bent the knee to him. By now, his gang was a big family of over fifty members—along this border, his faction probably held the most influence of any group around.

“Anyway, Boss... Who in the world are they? They appeared out of nowhere with such a towering monster in tow...”

Gokhan shrugged. “Who knows? I don’t know that much, but one thing’s clear: tonight’s our big chance. That carriage’s definitely loaded with our ticket to fortune.”

In the back of his mind, Gokhan had a hunch—perhaps it was his instincts as a monster tamer talking. Only someone of significant status would bring around such a monster. Normal monster tamers depended on potions and drugs, but to his shock, that Arachnidarus had been domesticated through trust instead. It was loyal to its human companion, and so it followed that its tamer must be highborn. He felt his warrior’s soul thrum with anticipation.

Considering their target’s route, he was willing to bet that they were Daryth nobility. Though he hadn’t a clue about why anyone so distinguished would be in a place like this, this was his big break.

“Boss! All the prep is done!”

Their plan was simple: make the monsters attack the group, and then sneak in under the cover of the chaos to steal their luggage.

The gang wasn’t filled with novices—they were professionals on the job. They’d even nimbly evaded the chivalric order of Cirquista thus far as they built their faction from the ground up. If they discovered that their prey were aristocrats, they’d sometimes take them hostage. Which way would the pendulum swing this time?

Gokhan’s eyes narrowed. “Suppose it’s time to kick things off.”



I munched. I chewed. I swallowed.

I couldn’t stop. Whenever I put the delicacy in my mouth, its rich flavor delighted my taste buds. *I can’t get enough of this, oink!*

“Master Slowe... I know I should have asked this earlier, but can’t we make Lady Alicia wait outside the dungeon while we explore?”

“Alicia knows the dangers very well.” I shrugged. “And there *are* actual merits to her going with us.”

Above all, we needed the map Alicia brought along, which contained precious information essential for our journey to the central levels of the labyrinth—information we desperately needed. I’d done as much digging as I could at Kirsch, but it wasn’t nearly enough.

The item I’d craved most was a map that depicted the layout of the dungeon so that we could reach the central levels with maximum speed, do what we had to, then get out as quickly as possible.

“But that’s going to be risky for Lady Alicia... My kitty said they’re

going to protect me, but...”

The ‘kitty’ was, of course, the Great Spirit of Wind who’d gone out into the forest to blow off steam from the long, tedious carriage ride. Our destination this time was a place where we’d surely brush with death on more than one occasion, so we’d asked for their opinion beforehand. For once, the Great Spirit seemed motivated, which was new for them. Apparently, it’d been a while since they’d gotten decent exercise, which they were in the mood for.

I muttered, “Blau’s going to protect Alicia, most likely, but... I’m not sure how strong she actually is.”

And then, when Charlotte and I were discussing Blau’s abilities, it happened.

Orcs appeared out of the blue from inside the forest, sprinting towards us while brandishing what distinctly looked like massive clubs.

“M-Master Slowe! O-Over there! Something’s headed our way!” Charlotte gasped.

A quick estimate gave me ten, twenty, thirty... *No, there are also some that are still hiding.* Orcs weren’t the only monsters around—there were also armed goblins and a large snake. The monsters were closing in on us, their hostility seeping out of them.

I fell silent, frowning. *Well, I didn’t see that coming. Hm, what to do...* I hadn’t expected that our observers inside the forest would actually attack us. I’d guessed that they were bandits, and since bandits usually shied away from people who seemed like tricky opponents, I’d thought they’d do the same for us.

“Might be a good opportunity to gauge Blau’s abilities,” I commented nonchalantly.

“Oh, come on, now isn’t the time for that! They’re getting closer!”

We’d parked our carriage on the bank of a lake, leaving us with nowhere to flee from the monsters that had shown up to attack us without warning.

I’d known that bandits dotted the border with Cirquista. Of course, in areas difficult for humans to reach, monsters created their own unique ecosystem. Armed orcs, armed goblins, as well as bipedal kobolds with bows drawn were poised to strike at any time.

I blinked. “Huh? That’s weird... There are only monsters around.” *Was it the monsters watching us earlier, then?*

No, that wanton greed I felt could only belong to a human. The bandits, it seemed, were still hiding inside the forest. I could feel calculating gazes on us that were distinctly different from monsters. Casting a *Nighteye* spell helped me see the dudes that watched us from the shadows.

I’d noticed those guys moving around inside the forest after we’d

set up camp here, but I'd never thought that they'd send in a wave of monsters for their first attack. The bandits leered at us as they mingled with the monsters between trees. The monsters observing us, however, didn't attack the bandits closer to them—their attention was focused on us. *I see. So there's likely a monster tamer or two among their ranks.*

"Lady Alicia is—" Charlotte scanned the area frantically. "—right next to Miss Blau! Ah! My kitty's back too!"

The Great Spirit of Wind had returned from their exploration, but they were yawning away in Charlotte's arms without a care in the world. *Wow. Looks like this is nothing to worry about in their eyes.* Seeing the composed Great Spirit, Charlotte seemed to settle down somewhat as well.

Now then, as for the bandits... I refocused on the incident at hand. They must have seen the giant spider, which meant that they should have an idea about our abilities, but they still chose to target us. *Oh well. I don't have a choice here. I want to get a read on that adventurer's strength too, so this might be a good opportunity.*

Blau's voice cut into my thoughts. "Forward, Futay."

Not a second later, the Arachnidarus leaped into the fray.

It was a one-sided battle. The Arachnidarus made good use of its long legs to kick the monsters around like toys. It spat out sticky threads from its maw towards the flying ones, and... *There it goes, falling to the ground.*

As a monster, it was on a whole other level. The monsters that attacked us now seemed like pitiful prey that couldn't even put up a fight against this apex predator. The bandits seemed to have control over pretty much every single monster living around this border, which meant that they were a force to be reckoned with. But they were nothing before Blau's monster.

Unrest immediately spread through the bandits like a ripple.

One man crept out of the dark forest. "Go, hydra!" he commanded.

A black bandana shrouded his face while light brown leather armor wrapped around his frame. You could tell with one look that this guy wasn't a virtuous, law-abiding citizen. He was probably the type that skulked around the underworld, and he came with a monster following close behind.

Charlotte let out a small yelp of fright at the sight. Several snake heads sprouted from a massive, bulky body, each with a will of their own as they twisted and coiled—frankly, it was nauseating. I felt as if I'd watched something sickening.

That hydra's obeying a human...which means that guy's a monster tamer. I suppose I'll take care of the hydra. Making someone else do all the

work goes against my morals, so...

The many heads of the hydra stretched and leaned its snapping jaws forward to attack. I wasn't fazed at all. I could hear Charlotte's scream in the background, but all I did was inhale slowly and breathe out a spell.

"Wind Blade."

A blade of wind extended from the tip of my wand. Mages unlucky enough to come under the rule of House Denning after they entered the Daryth army might recognize it—this was the first spell they'd learn. It was a spell that manifested a magical sword, and our wands served as the hilt. Close-quarters combat was an area where mages fell short, but of course, House Denning had a fondness for tearing down conventions, which is why they favored this simple spell that gave them a literal edge.

The blade I manifested had a relatively long reach, and I gave a light swing.

A thump. One hydra head fell listlessly onto the ground.

"Did you guys really think that *I* would be weaker than that thing?"

Color drained from the face of the monster tamer. With my *Wind Blade* in hand, I sprinted towards the man.

I'd cut down one of the many heads of the hydra, and for a while, it spat its red tongues as it writhed in agony, fixing its many pairs of eyes on me alone. *Oooh boy, Mister Hydra's mad.* Its smooth skin reminded me of snake scales, but tinged red. One of the monster's longtime companions had fallen at my hand, and it must've despised me. I could feel its animosity and determination to bring about my demise.

It opened its many mouths and inhaled. There was a whistling sound as air rushed into the mouths of the remaining heads. A bloodred glow began filling the numerous gaping maws, the telltale sign of crimson flames. I knew what it was—*Inferno Breath*.

In a strained, desperate voice, the man yelled, "K-Kill hiiiim!"

Roaring tongues of flame raced directly towards me from that creature's mouths. It would be devastating to an average citizen who happened to come to the border. Actually, the frail body of any human would be grilled to a crisp on impact. An ordinary person would definitely lose all will to put up a resistance after witnessing the terrifying hydra. *Key word, "ordinary."*

I held my hand up towards that torrent of heat and dissipated it. I did the same with the darkness spells that the man's comrades likely cast in unison with the *Inferno Breath*.

"The fight'll be over if I defeat you, right?" I gave a sidelong glance to the man.

I made the area around my feet explode like gunpowder and stepped forward with all my strength. The monster tamer thrust his arm in my direction and moved his lips. A barrier of magic stood in my way. A magic item.

It must have cost a small fortune to buy, but that was the only significant thing about it. I could easily cut it down with my blade, but then, that hydra moved in front of the man to protect him, like a meat shield.

I let out a grunt of effort. There was resistance as I swung my blade. It dug into the hydra's tough skin.

Of course, I wasn't going to end things there. I followed up my first attack, thrusting the blade hard, and pierced the hydra's heart. A tortured scream of agony tore out of the creature's throats.

Seeing the fallen hydra, the man's face warped. Panic was clear on his features. "Wh-Who the hell *are* you?! How could a noble stay calm before a damned *hydra*, of all things?!"

I almost wanted to shake my head at his display. As the leader of a bandit gang, he couldn't afford to ever lose his composure like that. His charisma as a powerful monster tamer would be tarnished, and it was only a matter of time before his lackeys lost faith in him and deserted him.

He turned and screamed, "T-Target that girl!!!"

They'd set their sights on Alicia, likely judging that they couldn't win against that adventurer's monster or me. The monsters under their banner were fleeing into the forest thanks to Blau's spider, and I'd dealt with what seemed to be the trump card of the bandits in a heartbeat.

Thus, it made sense that they'd targeted Alicia instead. I was willing to admit that they'd made a sensible choice. I'd been aware that the bandits were making a move on Alicia.

I hadn't as much lift a finger to stop them. *Why, you ask? Well, Blau's right next to her.*

But I'd miscalculated, because that woman adventurer didn't seem to make any moves to protect Alicia, and eyes widening, I yelled her name, "Alicia!"

Though the bandits were closing in, Blau remained motionless. In her stead, I'd reacted instantaneously.

"Aqua Orbs."

The bandits froze in place. They didn't seem to understand what had happened to their own bodies as one after another dropped to the ground like flies. They writhed and struggled frantically, trying to remove the balls of water engulfing their entire heads. I'd prepared for the nightmare scenario, and it'd turned out to be the right choice.

Rain had showered the forest yesterday, and there were puddles

of water around—I made use of those. The bandits were fumbling as they struggled for air, but with their heads immersed in water, that wasn't possible. I let them suffer to a certain extent before dispelling the spell. Fear paled their complexions as they repeatedly took in big gulps of air. Targeting Alicia seemed to be the last thing on their minds as relief settled in after the looming threat was gone.



With a cold voice, I said, "I'll let you off this once. Get lost."

After the bandits fled back into the forest, I went up to Blau and nearly grabbed her by the collar. "What the hell were you thinking...? Why didn't you protect Alicia? Answer me."

I'd treated this incident as a trial for how readily the woman would protect Alicia. That was why I'd deliberately turned a blind eye to those heading towards her. This woman was an adventurer that Alicia had been willing to spend a fortune on, and I'd assumed that she'd easily strike down such small fry and protect Alicia.

But Blau had just stood by and watched.

"I know that you might not be satisfied with this answer, but there was no clause about fighting humans in our contract. That is one of my reasons."

I stared at her, incredulous. "And you think I'd buy that?"

"That is why I said you might not be satisfied. A second reason, Slowe Denning, is that I wanted to test your abilities. Deadweights are unnecessary during dungeon expeditions."

Blau had said that in a detached voice—there was no guilt, no nothing, as she stroked the body of the spider that'd chased the monsters into the forest.

Anger boiled over in my heart as I watched her. *She... Does she even know how Alicia would've ended up if I hadn't intervened?!*

She continued, "I believe we are the same, you and I. You also deliberately arranged for the bandits to target Alicia to test my abilities, didn't you?"

I chewed on my lip. I couldn't deny that. Her tamed monster's strength was clear at a glance, but I still didn't know how strong she was. What was her attack style? Her battle strats? To gain that knowledge, I'd done exactly what she'd accused me of. *So...she noticed.*

"Weren't you supposed to be Alicia's escort?"

"I am. I will escort Lady Alicia to the middle layer of the Labyrinth of Cirquista, obtain the object she is looking for, then return with her. That is my job, but that is all. And, well... I assumed that it was your job to protect Lady Alicia as her fiancé. Isn't it?"

I'd never expected such an answer, and for a while, I was at a complete loss for words.

After that attack, we were a little uneasy about spending the night in the same location, but Blau argued that those bandits would probably never show their faces again. I shared the same opinion.

I sighed. When we'd first settled down next to the lake, I'd thought it'd be a night to relax and rejuvenate, but then those weird

guys showed up and ruined all my plans.

The interior of the carriage was dark with all the lamps snuffed out. Inside the carriage, Alicia was curled up in her blanket, and I turned to her. “Alicia, I’m against that adventurer staying with us.”

It was only natural that I had many misgivings about the woman—she didn’t even protect her client!

But Alicia didn’t agree. “I’m the one at fault here. I forgot to include battles with humans inside our contract when I hired her. But it’s fine now, I’ve already asked her to protect me from humans as well.”

“‘Asked’?” I repeated in a tone of disbelief.

“Slowe, she dealt with the monsters as per her contract,” Alicia reminded me. “And to be honest, I was actually rather reassured after that. When the bandits showed up, she didn’t lose her composure at all.”

Alicia had a point there. The woman’s monster was strong, and likely, the adventurer herself was strong enough that the bandits hadn’t even posed a threat to her. At least, that was the feeling I got from her mannerisms, but... *Being strong and being trustworthy are completely different things.*

“But you’re her client, and you were in danger.”

“You protected me though, Slowe. Thanks for that, by the way. It made me happy.”

It was unfair. And how could I keep arguing after that?

“Eat. They are freshly caught. These taste good.”

Whenever night fell, we’d stop our carriage near a body of water and Blau would procure food. She worked wonders on fish, and her seafood dishes were always a delight. I was so glad that Alicia had added a clause about food supply inside her contract. At the moment, the only complaint I had about the adventurer was how she hadn’t protected Alicia.

Time flew by.

“We have arrived.”

We found ourselves at the entrance of a small, gaping hole inside a mountain range. An abandoned mine.

Apparently, this mountain had once been a mine with plenty of minerals and ores for people to excavate, but it’d been abandoned after people had squeezed it dry. I heard that a network of tunnels ran deep through the heart of the mountain, almost as if worms had bored their way through it. And we were currently at the opening of one of these countless tunnels.

It was dark, and I couldn’t make out much detail inside the

tunnel. However, I could feel a breeze stroking my skin, which meant that it must be connected somewhere. *Wait, is this...?*

Blau nodded. “Yes. *This* is the secret entrance to the Labyrinth of Cirquista.”

Chapter 3: Labyrinth of Cirquista

Cirquista had a special relationship with water. And there was another unique strength of this country that no other nation in the south could compete with: their wealth of knowledge when it came to handling monsters. Cirquista was littered with dungeons, and against these inhuman opponents, their military might was even more formidable than that of Daryth.

Alicia shook her head. "I would've never predicted that this path's connected to the labyrinth... Blau, is this area safe?"

"Until we reach the labyrinth, it is nothing more than a coal mine. There is the occasional encounter with monsters, but their strength is nothing of note. Once we reach the intersection with the labyrinth, there is a distinct change in the atmosphere, and you will be able to tell immediately."

"Huh. Hey, just wondering, but what'd happen if you sold information about this route to the guild?"

"You can reach the central levels from this path much faster than the official entrance the guild manages. Thus, I would likely gain a hefty compensation if I did that. However, in the eyes of other adventurers who know of this route, my reputation would be in shambles. I would likely never come across valuable information from this network again."

One of these numerous dungeons was the Labyrinth of Cirquista, Demon Land. Of all the dungeons inside the south that had yet to be cleared, it was infamous as one of the most vicious, and I'd heard that the lowermost levels were home to godlike monsters that humans had never seen before. The headquarters of the southern Adventurers' Guild had labeled this dungeon as "unconquerable," and had restricted entry to only adventurers with permission.

In other words, no one entered Demon Land and lived to tell the tale. Though adventurers had been around for a long time, the dungeon was still indomitable, and no one could even come up with a plan to clear it, let alone accomplish such a plan.

I heard Charlotte's concerned voice. "Master Slowe? You're frowning. Are you all right? You ate so much food before we came in, but... Are you already hungry?"

I shook my head. "Nah, I was just thinking about something. When your brain works hard, you start feeling peckish. I'm sure

you've heard of that before."

"It's my first time hearing such a saying..."

No matter how tightly the Adventurers' Guild managed the dungeon, it was a fool's errand to try and keep it completely locked down. New entrances appeared every day, and though the guild and chivalric order were on a constant mission to search and destroy, they were only human. As long as the dungeon core in the heart of the dungeon was still intact, the dungeon would continue to expand and grow. In the case of a gigantic dungeon like the Labyrinth of Cirquista, humans simply couldn't keep up.

Blau explained this to Alicia. "Lady Alicia, the Labyrinth of Cirquista is a patchwork dungeon made from several dungeons fusing into one. The four dungeons that make up the central levels are especially infamous, and beneath the central levels, there is no end to the lowermost levels. Our destination is one of the sections inside the central level. Do you know of it?"

"...Demon's Rise, right?"

We were currently heading into Demon Land from an entrance that had slipped the guild's notice. Such information was priceless. If someone revealed that abandoned mine to the guild, according to Blau, the person would definitely be hunted down until they paid the price for their treachery.

The spider that had acted as our transport until we'd arrived at the mine was no longer in sight, if anyone was wondering. We'd parted ways just before we'd entered the cave. *A shame, really. I was actually feeling a weird sense of kinship with it.*

"The central level is, to be blunt, hell. The section we have our sights on is one of the four major areas that make up the central levels, which is a major pillar of Demon Land. This dungeon has the lowest adventurer return rate, and a shapeless slime rules supreme as the dungeon master there."

"I know that much..." Alicia muttered impatiently. "Looter Stain, the monster who escaped the capture of Daryth's Guardian Knight, of course."

"Yes. That eccentric monster that has an obsession with collecting magic items."

The monster we had to defeat inside that dungeon was a slime called "Looter Stain," who was deemed Public Enemy Number One of this entire continent.

Though it might seem surprising, in this continent, there were several wanted monsters with tremendous bounties on their heads. Looter Stain was one of them. This slime had stolen several irreplaceable national treasures from the nations in the south, and even now, royal families from every nation were searching for it with

crazed looks in their eyes.

In the present day, the monster had settled down in Demon Land as its dungeon master. No one could keep track of how many treasures it had plundered, and some even said that the collective worth was enough to found a new nation. I had to admit, it was a big name even among all the wanted monsters.

Charlotte blinked. “Wait... Lady Alicia, did she just say a *slime* is a dungeon master?”

Blau frowned. “Little lady... Did you not hear anything from him?”

“I-I’m so sorry...”

“You had so much time to spare. What were you even doing...?” Blau let out a small sigh. “I suppose this is a good opportunity. The item we wish to retrieve is the Binary Wand, so allow me to give you a lecture about the threat of its current owner.”

I couldn’t blame Charlotte for her lack of knowledge. The monster’s rampages in the south had been a thing of the faraway past, long before we were born.

Blau continued, “Looter Stain collected magic items by raiding the entire world. I believe the creature only started making a name for itself after it obtained a magic item that could conjure a special barrier—King’s Providence. To my knowledge, in recent years, that Guardian Knight was the only one who managed to so much as land a hit on that thing.”

Indeed, the opponent we had to face was a slime, a monster that was at the very bottom of the food chain of all the varieties out there. A watery membrane enveloped its entire body, and humans didn’t know whether they were capable of more than instinctive thoughts. They were even weaker than my old friends—orcs—and with a stick in hand, even a child could defeat them. However, *this* slime was a formidable creature that had even slipped away from the Guardian Knight.

Blau moved on to its more recent activities. “Due to the Guardian Knight’s attack, the slime was on the verge of death before it disappeared from the public eye. It later ended up as a dungeon master in the central levels, as I mentioned earlier. Usually, heading to its lair is the most arduous task inside the labyrinth. If we were to travel from the official entrance, it would take us one entire week just to reach there.”

“But Blau,” Alicia interjected, “we have a special ace up our sleeve this time, don’t we?”

“Yes, Lady Alicia. We have your map this time, after all. It is possible to reduce this travel time to the minimum.”

“So... How long will we have to walk?” Alicia muttered.

“If everything goes according to plan, it might even be possible for us to arrive at our destination in a single day. While we are on the topic, we have nearly arrived at the labyrinth. There will be an abrupt transformation in the atmosphere, so it will be easy to tell.”

Blau was right, because a few moments later, the path of the coal mine suddenly transformed. The shape of the tunnel itself was the same, but the vivid grass there was difficult to ignore.

Lamplight no longer illuminated the path ahead of us. Instead, glowing grass was our light source. It grew from the ground, on the walls that had once been decorated with mine lamps, on the ceiling... Everywhere.

“Glowgrass.” Blau’s cool voice echoed inside the tunnel. “A grass that monsters actively plant as a light source. This is the indication of the labyrinth’s entrance.”

Though it was an enchanting sight, their locations were not orderly at all, thrown around wildly without a shred of consideration for beauty—not the work of humans, just like Blau had said.

Alicia admired it and whispered, “Still, it’s quite pretty.”

“Lady Alicia, though it might be a wonderful sight, please don’t touch them,” Blau said in a detached tone. “To humans, they are deadly toxic.”

Alicia retracted her hand with a start. And this marked the beginning of our dungeon exploration.

A brief note about the upper and central levels that made up the Labyrinth of Cirquista: most adventurers earned their keep by delving into the uppermost levels, where they obtained riches. Only adventures with exceptional ability and ambition dared to venture as far down as the central levels.

I heard that even adventurers with permission to enter the labyrinth would need to travel for at least a week to arrive at the central levels if they chose to take the official route. But Blau claimed that traveling down the path through the abandoned mine cut out more than half of our journey to the central levels.

There was silence. None of us said a word as we marched on. Blau led the way, with Alicia following close behind and then Charlotte and I bringing up the rear.

We’d agreed to spend no more than seven days exploring the inside of the dungeon. We only brought along the most convenient rations and water, choosing to prioritize speed over all else.

The sound of conflict broke the silence. I couldn’t pinpoint where it was coming from, but it definitely didn’t sound human. Humans couldn’t make such sounds—ferocious howls that sent chills of fear running through me from head to toe.

Blau explained, “As you can hear, monsters often come into

conflict with each other inside the Labyrinth. The central levels are still technically somewhat organized, but there are no dungeon masters in the upper levels to keep the lesser beasts in line, so the monsters here do as they please.”

Alicia muttered, “It sure sounds like it...”

“Monsters gain strength through their skirmishes with each other, and those who seek further power seek it out by descending further down, into the central levels. In the upper levels, speed is of the essence. Let us hurry along.”

Along the way, I saw monsters sputtering words of resentment while on the prowl for adventurers. The goblins that made their settlements around the entrance of the dungeon were nothing like their brethren that I’d encountered elsewhere. These rust-colored goblins were capable of speech and possessed wands as well. They were probably mutants, but either way, monsters of such caliber lingering so closely to the entrance was unusual.

Furthermore, I’d even seen bipedal insect-like...*things* with four legs. In other dungeons, I wouldn’t be surprised if I heard that one of these creatures was the dungeon master, but the Labyrinth of Cirquista was crawling with them. *This* was the usual state of the upper levels of this dungeon.

“...Meeow.”

“Young lady, you are probably the only one who has ever brought a pet to a place like this...”

Of course, that sharp remark came from Blau. Since the very beginning, that woman had blatantly disapproved of Charlotte joining our party. *Well, too late for that.* It wasn’t like she could do anything about it since her client, Alicia, had given Charlotte her approval.

Charlotte’s shoulders drooped. “I-I’m so sorry...”

“It will get in the way when I try to detect the presence of monsters. Make sure it stays as quiet as possible.”

From their position in Charlotte’s arms, the Great Spirit stared at me. Before we’d entered the dungeon, I’d told the Great Spirit and Charlotte one thing: if Charlotte and I ever ended up going separate ways, the Great Spirit must take Charlotte out of this place and flee.

With a cold voice, the woman declared, “If it is too much of a nuisance, I will leave that pet behind.”

Well, you say that, but this grumpy cat’s actually the strongest one out of all of us.

Twenty, maybe thirty minutes later, Blau brought us to a standstill. I’d heard the monsters howling and growling along the way, but we hadn’t run into any of them so far.

“Lady Alicia, please halt.”

“Is something wrong, Blau?” Alicia frowned.

“A monster is heading our way. We cannot avoid encountering it.”

Blau had mentioned that she’d chosen a path with the least monsters possible, but naturally, we were bound to come across one eventually. *So, we’re finally going to fight an enemy, hm? This is my chance to show off a little in front of Charlotte.*

What happened next, however, ruined any chances of that. Suddenly, a loud thud echoed from further down the path, like something heavy hitting the ground, and Blau brought her arm back down to her side.

“Huh?” Alicia and Charlotte said at once, dumbfounded. The only light source around was the dim light of the glowgrass, and those two probably hadn’t been able to make out what had happened.

“Blau, wh-what did you just do?” Alicia asked, taken aback.

The woman was loyal to her client. She’d probably have ignored me if I’d been the one to ask. Blau turned back and allowed us to have a good look at the sword hilt at her hip. It was only the hilt; there was no blade in sight.

“This item is called Shakhtar’s Sword of Light, a magic sword. I can freely adjust the length of the blade with the strength of my grip. I believe you know how sharp it is after that demonstration.”

I furrowed my eyebrows. “Wait. Hold up. Blau, how in the world did you get a hold of *that*?”

“I do not understand what you mean by that.”

“That weapon you have is something passed down through generations of House Denning. What happened to its previous owner?”

“I found it lying around in a dungeon. According to adventurers’ practices, it now rightfully belongs to me.”

“You just happened to find it...lying around? Was it in this specific dungeon?”

She paused. “Who knows? I don’t owe you an answer.”

The magic sword Blau possessed had once belonged to my uncle, Louis, who had disappeared in this dungeon. “Okay then, let me put it this way. Do you know the previous owner of that sword?”

“I have no obligation to answer that,” she said in a clipped tone.

Urgh, this lady really doesn’t mesh well with me. I knew it. Louis had come to the labyrinth of his own volition. I wasn’t angry or anything at her because she was using his weapon—after all, being an adventurer meant roughing it. Sometimes, you had to scavenge weapons from human corpses. The stakes were high in dungeons, and you needed to do whatever it took to survive, no matter how unethical. I wasn’t about to start preaching to her, because that was part of being an adventurer. What I *was* concerned about, however...

I wanted to know where she had found Louis's weapon. If she had come across it in this dungeon... I wanted to know where Louis had breathed his last. Blau, however, did not seem like she was willing to share any more information.

I pursed my lips. "Stingy."

"I have no time to waste on quarrels. And don't get so worked up. You will lose sight of the big picture."

With those words, the woman swung her sword. The monster creeping up from behind me tumbled onto the ground.

I had been completely ignorant, and upon realization, I felt goosebumps rise on my skin as I shuddered.

"Lady Alicia, please stop for a moment." Blau's nonchalant voice rang out.

The adventurer had single-handedly eradicated every single enemy we encountered with that Sword of Light. Her blade even reached enemies in the distance that we couldn't see. They dropped like flies before her.

"I knew I could count on you, Blau," Alicia praised. "Have you run into any problems so far?"

"None."

"Is my map useful?"

"Yes. This map is a wondrous thing, and it is impressively accurate. Its creator must have been a legendary adventurer."

Doubting that this adventurer knew this dungeon like the back of her hand would be silly. I was starting to suspect that she was too good to be true—there had to be a catch somewhere.

But we hadn't even yet arrived at the heart of our expedition.

"Meat, fish, oink, oink. Meat, fish, oink, oink."

I was singing a little song about what I wanted to eat when Blau turned around and shot me a dirty look, but I couldn't help myself. *Jeez, what a narrow-minded person. Hey, if we stay silent the entire time, we're going to get depressed! I'm just lightening the mood.*

Blau had only brought along the bare minimum in terms of food supplies. She had said that she would mostly make do with what was available inside the dungeon. In other words, we were going to have to hunt monster game. Adventurers who tackled these such dungeons on the regular grew used to this kind of cuisine. There was even a subculture surrounding food made up of dungeon game.

Charlotte tiptoed towards me. "Master Slowe, look at this!" She thrust her hand before me and showed me the thing she had caught.

When I got a good look, I felt such a nasty shock that I nearly fell over. *Okay. I... Uh.* In Charlotte's hands was a body, long and ropelike

—it was a snake. That snake reminded me of the hydra that those bandits at the border had tamed. It was sleek and shiny and very much dead.

Charlotte's face practically glimmered as she smiled broadly at me. "Let's eat this later," she whispered. "I think this is the kind of thing they eat in dungeons, right...?"

Faced with the brunt of her radiant smile, I could only nod. Despite her outward appearance, Charlotte loved wilderness survival. I could absolutely rely on her survival skills in situations like these.

For those who are wondering, the snake was cleaned and cooked to perfection afterwards, making a quick and dirty snack for Charlotte and the Great Spirit of Wind.

It was a few hours into our expedition, and after several hours of monotonous scenery, one was bound to suffer a decline in mental health. That applied to physical health as well.

"For some reason, I'm feeling really down..." Charlotte muttered weakly.

"Me too, Charlotte."

We both shared the same experience inside the thick fog that permeated the dungeon. Apparently, the reason so many powerful monsters were willing to settle down in the shallow upper levels was that they found comfort within the haze. But to humans, the fog was anything but comfortable—it was toxic.

But naturally, Blau came to the rescue. "The popular theory is that the curses and resentment of the dead have thoroughly tainted the ground here, and these curses eat away at humans. Lady Alicia, please take this. It will alleviate the symptoms for about a day."

Blau took out a handful of white pills and distributed one to each of us. She took the initiative to swallow hers first, perhaps demonstrating that it wasn't poison. I downed the pill she handed over with water from my canteen and asked, "Couldn't you have told us that earlier?"

"If we linger for too long in this area, our awareness will become muddled, and heat will drain from our bodies. I am sure that by now, you understand why I have not stopped to rest for even a single moment. Personal experience means not making the same mistakes twice."

I wasn't too satisfied with that explanation, but I chose to nod without a struggle. Blau's argument was logical and sound, so much so that I couldn't argue with it. There wasn't anything to pick at. But it was clear that Blau hadn't shared all of what she knew. *If I were an adventurer... Oh boy, I'd never want to be in a party led by her.*

“Blau,” I began, “was that a Giant Wilted Leaf Worm you just killed?”

“I am surprised you recognized it. In that case, you must be aware of how troublesome they are.”

“I sure am.”

After all, any time one such creature made an appearance in Daryth, an entire order of knights in that domain would be dispatched to take care of it. I let out an internal sigh. *The upper levels are supposed to be where the weakest monsters live, but it's already so dangerous... I thought. No wonder the Adventurers' Guild thinks that this place is impossible to clear. Actually, "Pure Madness" would be a better name for this dungeon. Are all those adventures who choose to come here suicidal or something? The dungeons I know of seem like child's play in comparison.*

“...Hm?”

When I stepped over the corpse of the monster that Blau had slain, I noticed that her method was rather peculiar. She had slain many of the monsters we'd encountered with her Shakhtar's Sword of Light, but there were two types of corpses. Some had their flesh and blood blasted all over the place, while some had died without any superficial wounds. That woman was probably using other offensive magic items as well.

Charlotte seemed to have come to the same conclusion. “Miss Blau,” she asked, “exactly how many weapons do you even have?”

“No adventurer would give you an honest answer to that question. Revealing the cards we hold up our sleeves will only lead us to our deaths.”

That reminded me—Louis also used to have several weapons in his possession. If my memory served me right, when he'd left House Denning far behind, he had also walked out with a magic sword that he'd filched from the family armory. A prized heirloom of House Denning: a sword enchanted with all the elements.

“I think it's about time we get some rest, don't you think, Blau?” I asked, feeling that the timing was appropriate.

Blau, however, shot that down instantly. “No. We cannot rest in a place like this.”

“Why's that? A little bit won't do any harm...” I whined.

“Listen. We didn't come into this dungeon through legal means. Unlike other dungeons, Demon Land is special, and the profiles of all the adventurers inside at any time are made public. We are not on that list, and if we come across adventurers who came in through the proper channels, they will assume we are bandits and there will be conflict. Not only that, but Lady Alicia is also in our party. If someone recognizes her, it will mean nothing but trouble.”

I couldn't argue against that. She had me convinced.

Alicia muttered, "Just listen to Blau, Slowe."

"Alicia... Okay, fine."

Haaah... My motivation's plummeting. I wasn't a professional at this adventuring business, true. But at the same time, well, obeying someone's instructions and having no say in the matter from start to finish didn't sit well with me. I wasn't used to it.

Something else bothered me too. Alicia, for some reason, had much more faith in Blau than me. She wouldn't listen to any of my advice or warnings. *Then again, I can see why. That woman sure does know what she's doing.*

Blau had put herself in the riskiest position by taking the lead. The sturdy lines of her shoulders practically oozed competence, and anyone would feel an instinctive urge to rely on her. *But isn't Alicia trusting her a little too much? Why in the world is Alicia so blind about this?*

From time to time throughout our journey, Blau would let us stay in place while she pressed on alone. She'd mentioned something along the lines of ensuring our safety, and whenever we traced her path after her signal, we found monster corpses littered around. Judging by how nothing else was disturbed, she had dispatched them before they'd even realized they were under attack. *Should've expected nothing less from a professional, I guess.* It was clear that Blau handled Louis's weapon perfectly.

Now was one such instance of just waiting around for Blau to clear the way.

"H-Hey. Slowe, where are you going?" Alicia muttered nervously.

"I'm only heading over to check up on Blau, that's all. I won't take long."

Normally, leaving Alicia and Charlotte behind was out of the question, but the Great Spirit was with them, passed out and sleeping soundly in Charlotte's arms, which was a sign that we were safe at the moment.

In silence, I walked forward.

Blau moved further down the dark dungeon path we were on. As I observed her, once again, I brooded about Alicia's unquestionable faith in the woman. Considering the adventurer's performance so far, anyone would trust her, because she had been nothing but perfect. She exterminated all enemies without fail and shielded her client from all possible dangers.

It might be shocking to hear that we, the clients, hadn't fought a single living monster inside the dungeon. Whenever Blau detected monsters ahead of us, she would leave us behind and defeat the

monsters alone, just like she was doing now. As for how she was scanning for these monsters, well... My guess was that she was using microscopic insect monsters as scouts.

I say that, but actually, the Great Spirit of Wind in Charlotte's arms told me as much secretly during a break.

"...What do you want? I remember telling you to stay behind and wait."

I caught up to Blau, and indeed, she was in the middle of slaughtering a monster. Upon seeing me, she let out a sigh. *Hey, what's with that?* She almost sounded like a guardian exasperated at a rebellious brat, and I felt a little flustered. But I felt like Blau should be aware that I still had doubts about her.

I took a deep breath, regaining my composure. "How did you manage to gain Alicia's trust? I've never seen her trust someone this blindly before. Not to mention, we're in a dungeon with danger around every corner."

"Are you jealous?"

"Me? Jealous?" I scowled.

"Are you not? For a moment, I thought that your feelings towards Lady Alicia as her former fiancé—ah, you two *are* betrothed now, let me correct that. I thought that perhaps you were feeling possessive as her fiancé. Lady Alicia seems to place me on a much higher standing in terms of being reliable, and likely, it makes you uncomfortable. But rest assured. I am a woman."

...So, she really is a woman, huh? She obscured over half of her face with bandages, so I hadn't been a hundred percent sure.

She shrugged and continued, "As you can see, you don't have to worry about me snatching away your fiancée."

"If you're joking, it's not funny. And for your information, our betrothal was forced upon us by our families who didn't even bother to ask our opinions beforehand. We're both against it."

"Oh? But she is a Cirquistan princess. If you become her legal fiancé, the world would be your oyster."

Even if she had been trying to hide it, I could tell—this woman seemed to be rather invested in my relationship with Alicia. The hints had been there for a long time. Whenever I'd talked to Alicia, I'd sensed someone's furtive gaze on us. Not only that, but when we'd fought that bandit gang at the border, she had said that she thought it was my job to protect Alicia.

Well, whatever. Blau's intentions on this matter weren't my problem. The pressing question was how she had gained Alicia's trust.

She raised an eyebrow. "Are you *that* curious about Lady Alicia's reasons for trusting me? I haven't done anything in particular. I am

loyal to my contract, and that is all.”

“...You didn’t protect Alicia from those bandits, though.”

“You still hold that incident against me? It seems that you are a much pettier man than I thought. That was only a trial where I tested whether you can be of any use inside this dungeon. In any case, let us stop wasting time and head back. I am worried about Lady Alicia. Even if your retainer had some kind of ace up her sleeve, it is better to be safe than sorry.”

I paused. “Ace up her sleeve? What’re you talking about?”

“In terms of ability, that retainer is extremely lacking compared to any of the adventurers who come into this dungeon, yes? For such a girl to come into a dungeon, she must have a secret weapon or two.”

I didn’t offer a reply. *A secret weapon... Well, I guess you can call them that.*

On our way back, we continued our conversation. Blau turned out to be much more talkative than I’d anticipated. *I have a feeling that this woman’s much more extroverted in a dungeon than on the surface.*

She muttered, “I repeat, I really haven’t done anything special when it comes to Lady Alicia.”

“That’s impossible. Alicia might not look like it, but she’s very delicate and guarded. She could never leave her life in the hands of an adventurer she only just met.”

“Isn’t that because her former fiancé is with her? With you around, she probably thinks that everything will be all right. The famed Dragon Slayer of the Country of Knights, they call you, and indeed, it seems that your strength surpasses even your rumors. Besides which, did you just call Lady Alicia a delicate little girl? Huh. I assumed that you knew her very well, but that doesn’t seem to be the case.”

I blinked. “Excuse me?”

“I have never heard an opinion so mistaken. Lady Alicia is much stronger than you can ever imagine. More than anything, she is fired up and driven at the moment—she will not bend or break easily. That is how she appears to me.”

Fired up and driven.

When I heard those words, I was so shaken that I felt as if someone had sucker punched me in the nose. I had to concede to her—she had me convinced.

Alicia, a delicate little girl? It wasn’t inaccurate, but it wasn’t fair to reduce her to that. At the moment, Alicia’s anger powered her. An anger towards her parents who didn’t care about her desires when they rudely decided her future in her stead in the form of political marriage.

I stared at the woman. “You’ve known Alicia for a long time,

haven't you?" There was certainty in my tone. She pretty much outed herself just now. A new acquaintance would never say that about Alicia.

Blau raised her hands in surrender. "My tongue slipped," she muttered wryly. "Sorry, could you please forget that?"



“No freaking way. Explain yourself already,” I said, impatient.

“Well, I suppose we aren’t strangers, I can tell you that much. However, we haven’t seen each other for a long time. That much is also true,” Blau admitted, and the corners of her eyes softened with a smile.

We’d gotten so close that I could see Alicia and Charlotte waiting in the exact spot I’d left them.

The woman muttered, “Ah, good. It seems that our girls are safe. That is enough for now, don’t you agree?”

The covering on her face made it difficult for me to get a precise read on her expression. But I was pretty sure that she had seemed relieved and happy when she had seen the two safe and sound.

Who in the world was Blau? Asking her directly would be the obvious choice, but if I were the one asking, she would probably dodge my question. After the earlier exchange, however, I knew that she at least had ties with Alicia. For now, that was enough for me.

There was something that caught my attention even more at the moment. Charlotte was biting and chewing away at something.

In a strained voice, I muttered, “Uh, Charlotte... What the heck are you eating?”

“Oh! Hi, Master Slowe! It tastes great, I promise. You want some?”

It looked downright grotesque. I couldn’t say that it looked appetizing in the least.

Charlotte had cooked the snake she’d caught earlier, and she was currently sharing it with the Great Spirit of Wind. Alicia, meanwhile, stared incredulously at Charlotte, aghast.

“I-I, uh, won’t take you up on that offer, but thanks,” I stammered.

Blau’s policy had been to bring along the bare minimum in terms of food supplies. She’d probably have passed Charlotte, who was a professional at procuring ingredients from what was available in the wild, with flying colors if she were actually teaching us. And indeed, she seemed to approve. “You can find near-limitless edible possibilities inside a dungeon. Of course, I am talking about the monsters. They do not taste bad at all. I shall be responsible for preparing our ingredients and cooking them... Is what I would like to say, but it seems that the retainer processes the ingredients immaculately as well.”

I turned to stare at Blau, and my expression likely mirrored Alicia’s. “Oh. Looks like you’re even well versed in the ways of monster cuisine, Blau...”

“Why are you surprised? Being knowledgeable about the biology of monsters is part and parcel of a monster tamer’s job description.”

Blau was hiding something. And the interesting thing was, the further we made it into the dungeon, the less effort she put into concealing that fact.

Many hours had passed since we began our trudge through the dungeon, and we finally got a breather. I felt myself letting out a sigh of relief.

Declaring that she would patrol the area, Blau disappeared. Before she left, however, she emphasized to me that I must not follow her this time, for there was a chance that I might run into danger. My role was to guard the two girls; it seemed that Blau at least had that much faith in my abilities.

As for the two girls, they were wiping away sweat with handkerchiefs. That wasn't to say the dungeon was hot—in fact, it was even chilly. However, when we humans entered a dungeon, our instincts screamed at us to get out; that dungeons weren't safe for humans. We broke out in a sweat for no apparent reason—perhaps that was our bodies' way of showing its wariness towards a hostile environment.

I moved away stealthily and plopped down. I shifted to hide the Great Spirit quietly grooming their fur with my body and I began muttering to them in a low voice. Altanger didn't often follow us into places like this, but they'd probably made an exception this time because they were aware of how dangerous this dungeon was.

Slowly, they muttered, "I'm still against this, Slowe. The stench of death is too strong here, meow."

They didn't have to point it out to me. *I know. I really do.* The Labyrinth of Cirquista wasn't a place we should have just barged carelessly into. Countless S-class adventurers had lost their lives here. Even a member of House Denning went missing here. If people ever learned that I had brought Alicia to a place like this, entire nations would be in an uproar.

"Altanger, I don't think that adventurer is our enemy, but keep an eye on her."

"I think it's better for me to stick with Charlotte, meow."

I hesitated. "Yeah, good point. I'm counting on you to protect her."

That guy waved their tail lazily before returning to Charlotte's side. With a worried look on her face, Charlotte hugged the Great Spirit of Wind. In a place filled with hazards like this, the Great Spirit was like a calming salve to Charlotte's nerves.

If push comes to shove... I'll ask the Great Spirit to take Charlotte and flee this place.

A dungeon was filled with once-in-a-lifetime opportunities for adventurers.

“Master Slowe, please look at that...”

Charlotte began to dig up something half-buried in the ground. It was a shield. A small, likely one-handed shield that swordsmen would equip, and...a jewel was embedded into its center.

We didn’t know a thing about appraisal, but even we could tell that it was a respectable treasure. Charlotte’s face said it all. Her eyes were shining—she wanted to take this back with us.

I shook my head. “Charlotte, we have to leave it here.”

“I-I know... I only thought that for one moment...”

Shoulders drooping, Charlotte leaned the shield against the wall. Like this shield Charlotte had found, there was adventurer equipment aplenty left scattered about this labyrinth. This fact alone was enough for it to be an attractive place for treasure-seekers.

A dismal atmosphere hung like a curtain over the dungeon, but it seemed to lighten after that interaction with Charlotte. However, a certain adventurer was staring at us so hard that I suspected it was a glare.

I muttered, “You’re not mute, you know.”

“It seems that you are carefree as always. Do you need a reminder about where we are?”

“...A little bit of friendly banter’s not gonna do us any harm.”

“One lapse in focus is enough to kill a man or two. I have no complaints as long as you are aware of that.”

Oh, I see what she’s trying to say. She’s basically telling me to have my wits about me and be more cautious since we’re in the Labyrinth of Cirquista, right? Urgh, she’s not fooling anyone. I can tell that she’s only reacting this way because she doesn’t like Charlotte.

The entire time, Blau had expressed her disapproval of Charlotte joining our expedition. At the entrance, she’d told Charlotte to wait with that spider, but Charlotte had insisted on coming along. *Sheesh, that was quite a tense moment.* In the end, Alicia had cut all our arguments short by declaring that we didn’t have time to waste, and thus, we had embarked on our quest as a party of four.

We walked on and on and on.

Only half a day had passed since we’d entered the labyrinth, but I could already feel fatigue weighing down every single part of my body. I’d gone into dungeons before with Princess Carina and the prince of Dustour, but those dungeons were nothing in comparison.

“Master Slowe...” Charlotte shuddered. “I feel like it’s gotten colder...”

I felt pressure. My instincts told me that I mustn’t press on.

Charlotte was shivering. Her secret weapon, the Great Spirit of Wind, was yawning away without a care in the world in her arms. I felt a spike of jealousy. *Urgh.*

But both Charlotte and I knew one thing: the Great Spirit's behavior meant that things were still under control.

Alicia, meanwhile, had the heart of a lion. I was sure that fear seized her as well, but she didn't let it show. Perhaps that encouraged Charlotte, and she also lifted her chin and pressed on.

Half a day wasn't long, but it was enough to teach me a few things.

First, my assessment of Blau as an adventurer only grew better and better. This woman was a force to behold.

Her cool voice rang out, "We will make a detour here."

Among all the adventurers I had seen in person up to this point, she was the most outstanding one. She left everyone else in the dust, in fact—in terms of ability, I didn't doubt her. She had an almost abnormal sensitivity to danger, and she was just as good at avoiding it.

As for her method of monster detection, well...

The Great Spirit of Wind reached out their paw from Charlotte's embrace and tried to catch a bug. This was the second time.

Immediately, I heard a slight hitch in Blau's breathing, and her face scrunched up. This made me even more certain of what the Great Spirit had told me. *So, she really is using the insects.* However, many monster tamers disliked people finding out about the cards in their hand, so I chose to keep it to myself. Well, between myself and the Great Spirit of Wind, who had probably swatted at the insect on purpose to poke fun at Blau.

"Young lady," Blau muttered, "let's turn that cat into emergency rations."

"Y-You can't do that! This kitty is very reliable!"

"Are you sure about that? It does not seem that way to me."

Oh boy, the Great Spirit's a nasty guy. They chose to do the exact thing that would piss Blau off. That'd ruin the atmosphere. I hope they cut it out.

"Um..." Charlotte spoke up, hesitant. "Was I seeing things, or was there no handle on that treasure chest earlier?"

Blau whipped her head around immediately at that. "Everyone, get down!"

Goosebumps rose on my skin as my pulse raced. Blau swung her Sword of Light. Tentacles had extended out from the treasure box behind us—a mimic—and with a succession of sickening squelches,

several of them fell onto the ground.

I'd left the fighting completely up to Blau until now, so my reaction had been delayed.

"What a cunning mimic..." Blau muttered. "It does not attack when it is opened, but after someone passes by..."

No matter how appealing the treasure boxes seemed, we couldn't take any of it back with us anyway, so we'd ignored all of them. We'd ignored the "treasure chest" earlier, but it had sprung on us when we all had our backs turned to it.

We all owed thanks to Charlotte's excellent call and her infatuation with valuable treasures. I also wanted to give a standing ovation to Blau's inhuman reaction time.

There was a long stretch of silence. Suddenly, Blau stopped in her tracks and muttered, "Young lady, you saved us there." Until now, Blau had seen Charlotte as a mere attendant—someone of a lower position. "If I had been paralyzed by the mimic's tentacles, we would have perished in a place like this." She held out a hand towards Charlotte. With the other, she unraveled the bandages that concealed the lower half of her face and revealed it to Charlotte. "I shall take back my words, Charlotte. Please take care of me, comrade."

Pink dusted Charlotte's face as she replied, "That's what I should be saying... Madam."

Wait, why's Charlotte all shy? Is that because Blau was much more stunning than she expected or something?

Blau then announced, "As a matter of fact, I have good news for you, Charlotte. We are in luck. We might be able to reach the central levels before day's end."

During our strategy meeting, the plan we'd decided on was supposed to be "slow and steady."

"Silence, please," Blau shushed us.

After declaring that we were lucky, Blau walked on with us in tow. *What's she going on about?*

She didn't offer much of an explanation. "We are very fortunate. You will know what I mean very soon. For now, don't overthink it—just follow my lead."

A moldy stench permeated the dungeon. As we progressed, however, the odor of fur and animals became stronger and stronger, and I grimaced. Suddenly, we spotted a sharp edge on the ground ahead of our path, and it was cut off there—a cliff. I poked my head out to peer at what was beneath us, and I found ground again around ten meters below our altitude. It wasn't just ground—it was a vast, open area.

My face paled. "There must be at least a hundred of them..."

Inside the darkness, a pack of barlgura monsters marched across a rugged, rocky area. Their muscles were practically bulging with freakish strength, and thick fur coated their entire frames. Some were quadrupedal, some walked upright on two feet. They looked like gorillas that had been bumped up a few sizes. *So, this is the source of that stink.*

The ground rumbled with their every step. If someone were thrown into that horde, they were done for. These were dangerous creatures that we had to stay away from, and they always moved around in packs. Blau had wanted to avoid monsters out of our league, and these matched that description perfectly.

I had to stop my teeth from chattering. “Oi, Blau... They’re... This isn’t funny, you know?!”

“Be quiet.” Gently, she placed her index finger against her lips. “Slowe, I want you to control the direction of the drafts with wind magic. Don’t let them detect our scent.”

Her eyes were still and serious, and I reacted instantly. I manifested a wind that would blow towards us, back into the direction we had come.

“Blau,” I whispered, “what’s your plan?”

“That’s a pack of barlgura. We’re in luck. These creatures just finished a round of slaughter in the upper levels and are in the middle of returning to the central levels.”

My eyes widened. “No way, are you...?”

“Yes, I am. We are going to follow them and enter the central levels.”

Calling it risky was the understatement of the century.

Alicia and Charlotte trembled, frightened. The embodiment of fear itself stood before us though we were too far to actually see them, and their howls echoed menacingly inside the dungeon. Letting these sounds go in one ear and out the other, I climbed down to the ground from the tunnel we were in and followed the horde.

Of course, we made sure we’d put plenty of distance between us and those monsters so that we wouldn’t tip them off about our presence. But the irrational part of my mind still whispered, *What if?*

Blau muttered, “Most monsters flee the minute they hear this sort of rumbling to evade the barlgura.”

Feeling the shaking of the ground, I replied, “I totally get it. Fighting those things sounds like a nightmare.”

“You can find monsters of this caliber anywhere inside this labyrinth. But they are the biggest threats amongst those that lurk in the upper levels.”

According to Blau, these barlgura were exceedingly ruthless and aggressive towards all living beings that weren’t their kin—bloodshed

only stimulated them, making them tricky opponents.

“I would advise against looking at the ground as you walk,” Blau warned. “These creatures leave a trail of corpses in their wake. Even the highest-ranking adventurers will avoid confrontation if they detect barlgura and choose to hide instead if they know what is good for them.”

Staring at the sight before me, I muttered, “I’m not surprised after seeing *this*...”

Several dead monsters were lying on the path we walked down. Innards and gore painted the corridor in a grotesque display, and I could feel bile rising into my throat. The dreadful thing was, I later spotted *humans* among this “body art” as well—adventurers, or what remained of them, at least.

There were at least two or three hundred monsters in the pack, and from our position, we couldn’t tell what was happening at the vanguard of their formation. But we *could* see the trail of death they left behind. Blau definitely hadn’t been exaggerating about how lethal these monsters were.

“Lady Alicia, please shut your eyes and take my hand,” Blau instructed. “If possible, it is best if you do not see any of this.”

“Don’t waste your time worrying about something like this. This...this is nothing. I’m fine,” Alicia insisted. She put on a brave front, but it was clear that she was battling her nausea.

To humans, death and dungeons went hand in hand. It was overdue, but we finally understood just how much danger we’d gotten ourselves into.

Alicia whispered, “Why didn’t they try to run? They know that these monsters are nearly invincible, right?”

“These creatures have a one-track mind. If they find you, they will chase you to the ends of the world and will not stop until they get their hands on you. That is what the barlgura do.”

“Even adventurers prestigious enough to get permission to come into this labyrinth ended up like that...” Alicia’s voice grew smaller.

“If a lone A-class adventurer risked their life to fight them, they could probably manage to take down around a dozen of them. But a pack this large? That is out of the question. If a human attacks them, it is not just the barlgura they have to worry about—other monsters will be attracted by the commotion as well.”

“Blau, are *you* able to defeat a pack this big?”

“You are my client, Lady Alicia. If you command me to slaughter the entire horde, I shall make it happen. But even you should be fully aware that this is not the appropriate time to do that.”

“...Yeah, you’re right.”

Even one wrong judgment could mean an unexpected encounter

with a dreadful monster, and as a result, the monsters could use *us* to paint the walls red. Yet another painful lesson we learned about the hellish place we'd walked into.

The pack of barlgura was moving down a flight of stairs.

"Those stairs will lead us to the central levels of Demon Land."

The barlgura had a habit of committing genocide on the upper levels to ease their stress, and once they were done, they would return to their natural habitat on the central levels. *Jeez... These guys are way too scary and way too much of a nuisance to everyone.*

What made my blood run even colder, however, was Blau's next proposal.

"We shall continue shadowing them close behind and head into the central levels," she said.

"...Oi." I scowled. "You haven't explained anything about the structure of the central levels to us!"

"I shall tell you about the central levels when we arrive there. There is nothing wrong with that."

"That'd be way too late...!"

Before I could start arguing with the woman, however, Alicia stopped me. "Slowe. Quit it. We're wasting precious time."

"But Alicia! We're going into this blind!"

"True, but right now, we're presented with a chance to advance into the central levels smoothly. If we miss it, it's gone forever. Right, Blau?"

The woman nodded. "It is exactly as you said, Lady Alicia."

I shut my mouth at their interaction. Her reasoning was sound. There was a safe, monster-free bubble around the barlgura, and this was indeed a golden opportunity. The difference between me and Alicia, however, was our level of trust towards that female adventurer.

"Slowe." Alicia grabbed my arm and squeezed. She met my eyes—she was determined.

I couldn't interfere with their decision.

Blau's detached voice echoed in my ears. "Moving into the central levels with the barlgura pack is common practice for adventurers with their sights set on the Demon's Rise. These creatures dwell in Demon's Rise, and after they vacate the area around the stairs, it will transform into a lair for other monsters until the pack visits again. If we miss this opportunity, our journey to the central levels will take much longer, and I cannot predict how much time we will need. I believe taking a manageable amount of risk is worth the reward."

She continued, "In my original plan, getting into the central levels was the biggest hurdle we had to overcome, but this changes everything. However, I shall leave the decision in your hands, Lady

Alicia. He also has a point. We need to make thorough preparations.”

Alicia didn't hesitate. "We'll keep going."

In the end, Alicia was the one who started this expedition, so she had the final say. *Seriously? Has she gone mad? We should be more cautious.* Alarm bells rang deafeningly in the rational part of my brain. But at the same time, I knew this was our lucky break. If possible, I wanted to get out of this hellhole as soon as I could.

"Run, and don't stop!" Blau hissed.

We descended the stairs that seemed endless. I tried looking down, but there wasn't even a hint of light to dispel the darkness at the end. According to Blau, dozens upon dozens of dullahans normally patrolled these steep stairs. The coast was clear thanks to the horde, and we were currently sprinting down as fast as our legs could carry us.

"Oiiiink," I whimpered.

Blau's raving mad! Why would anyone ever go along with such a plan?!

We didn't come across any monsters on the never-ending stone stairs. Blau'd been right, as always.

But we *did* run into other living creatures—bats. After the pack went down and left the area, a colony of bats rushed upwards from the central levels. I couldn't see a thing.

So this is why other monsters don't use the stairs immediately after the barlgura pack leaves. After the barlgura sated their bloodlust in the upper levels, the mess of entrails they left behind made for a perfect feeding ground for carnivorous bats. Blau, our walking encyclopedia, had told us as much while we pushed our way through the sea of bats.

"...Charlotte! Don't let go of my hand!" I yelled.

Explanations aside, these bats were pretty damned annoying. Their shrill screeches grated on my ears, and without my vision, I felt like my heart was in my throat—I was scared that I might make a misstep and tumble right down. But I had no other choice but to press on. *I mean, we've already come this far. We can't go back now.*

From time to time, I could hear Blau's shouts over all the noise. "Halfway there!" she'd yell, or "The last stretch!" Her words rekindled the flames of courage within me, and I took each step one at a time. Charlotte was slightly ahead of me, and she nearly tripped, but I pulled her up and steadied her.

Then, from within the chaos, I heard Blau's voice ringing out from somewhere in front of me. "We're here!"

My vision slowly cleared. My eyes widened, and I was speechless.

Once, someone had said that the stairs between each level of a dungeon served the same purpose as gates in human settlements.

Faced with this sight, I was inclined to agree.

We'd run down the long stairs and had sprinted out into the open—the stairs had been inside a towering rock wall. And what I saw was, well...

"You've got to be kidding me..." I muttered numbly.

We'd been greeted by an immense cavern upon arrival. Those stairs had been long for a reason—the ceiling was far, far away. When I'd looked past the rough, rocky area, I saw something that'd stolen my breath away.

A fortress of unfathomable size stretched as far as the eye could see. Deep moats encircled the fortress, and a sole wooden bridge connected the island to the outside world. Judging by the layout, we had to cross it if we wanted to go inside.

"It's a military stronghold..." Alicia muttered.

I nodded in agreement.

Blau enlightened us once again—over several thousand formidable monsters loyal to the Looter Stain took up residence inside that fortress. Other monsters, meanwhile, lived the standard dungeon monster life, dwelling in caves and tunnels that bore through the rock wall behind us.

I observed the moat carefully. From what I could see, it was ridiculously deep. *Huh. So these guys aren't letting their guards down—they're wary of human adventurers.* That theory didn't last long, because Blau then explained that the moat was less a deterrent to keep adventurers *out* and more a cage to trap adventurers *in*.

The connecting wooden bridge, meanwhile, was so wide that it could probably fit ten orcs lying down in a horizontal line. The barlgura we'd followed were crossing the bridge now.

"We will relocate. If they discover us here, all of our hard work will be for naught," Blau said in a clipped tone. "I am sure you can see the kobolds at the entrance of the fortress."

There was quite a distance between us and the moat and the bridge that spanned it. Along that line of sight were a number of stalagmites, which further lowered visibility. I scrutinized the fortress entrance and indeed found the aforementioned kobolds standing guard. Metal armor wrapped around their frames; these creatures were completely different from the kobolds we'd encountered at the border.

After a pause, Blau muttered, "The kobold soldiers will only be fully alert during an attack or an emergency, but don't underestimate their eyes. We are far away, but I don't want to take any chances."

With Blau in the lead, we repeatedly slipped through the gaps between the rocks, heading with a destination in mind. We walked

across the sloped rock surface for several minutes and landed in an area with a group of boulders that formed a perfect hiding spot. Metal weapons and equipment littered the ground.

“Our human appearance will do us no good in the central levels. We must disguise ourselves as monsters.”

In the upper levels, speed had been of the essence, meaning that anything that unnecessarily slowed us down, like a disguise, would only hinder our progress. In the central levels, however, the importance of keeping a low profile far outweighed anything else, no matter the cost to our speed.

I put on chain mail. The armor on me looked mismatched, because I’d assembled all the parts from different sets. If anyone saw me right now, they’d definitely assume I was a monster imitating a human knight.

When I walked, the armor slid around on me, the different parts clanging together noisily—it didn’t fit me right. Blau insisted it was fine because monsters couldn’t discern such a minute detail.

As I lowered the helmet onto my head, I reflected back on our progress. It’d only taken us half a day to reach the central levels. We had Alicia’s map, sure, but it was still shocking. Such a journey would usually take at least a week. Taking her knowledge of a secret entrance to this labyrinth and our speed into account, Blau was astoundingly capable. The results she produced wore down my distrust bit by bit, and I had to admit that Alicia’s faith hadn’t been misplaced.

“Is that bridge the only way in?” I asked her.

“Technically, no. I am sure you have noticed the many caves and tunnels around us.”

We’d traversed a long distance from our starting point, but I could still see the opening on the rock wall—the stairs we’d run down. I could see a number of dark holes of various sizes and shapes dotting the wall above it.

Blau gestured to them. “A few of those caves are connected to the fortress. However, it would not be wise to enter through them. The cavern network is a complex maze, and its layout is not on the map either. If we go in, the only thing we would get out of it is encounters and, subsequently, battles with monsters.”

She’d mentioned before that those caves were lairs for monsters. This time, she added that these residents used to live in the fortress, but had to leave for one reason or another, such as a harsh life or oppression within its walls.

Armor, check. Helmet, check.

“Will this disguise *really* fool them...?” I muttered. Once put

together, it seemed surprisingly convincing to me, but I wasn't sure what a real monster would think.



I let out a small snort, keeping my guard up. We were infiltrating hostile territory, after all. But my helmet greatly impeded my vision—and all my other senses, for that matter.

Which meant that I'd been caught completely unaware.

"Hm?"

Alicia suddenly disappeared from my field of vision. I took off my helmet and scanned the surroundings. She wasn't there. *What is she even doing? Where did she go?*

Then, I saw Charlotte lifting a single finger. *She's pointing upwards?* I craned my neck and found Alicia above us.

The majestic talons of a monstrous bird had seized Alicia's shoulders in a firm grip, hoisting her aloft. Alicia, meanwhile, was so shaken that she made no sound. The bird ascended rapidly, and soon, it looked smaller than my own fist.

"Alicia!" I yelled in a panic.

The enormous, abominable bird soared in the direction of the fortress.

I had to save her. I sprinted at full speed, and my armor clattered noisily with every movement.

I didn't hesitate for a single moment as I raced across the bridge.

Chapter 4: I Walk through the Valley of the Shadow of Death...with My Former Fiancée

I'd been the only one who'd reacted immediately when that shady bird had taken Alicia away.

Rumors said that the central and lowermost levels of the Labyrinth of Cirquista were a whole new world. Now I knew why.

“...Oink!”

The moat below the bridge looked like a dark abyss that'd swallow me whole, and if I fell, it would be to my inevitable death. *Surely this bridge is sturdy, right? It won't suddenly fall apart beneath me, right?!*

“Oink, oink!” I mimicked an orc, grunting as I crossed the bridge with fear quickening my pulse even more. The helmet covering my head gave me cover, and I moved in a sluggish gait like a slowpoke orc.

Between snorts, I sneaked a glance at the two kobolds standing guard at the entrance of the fortress on the other side of the bridge. They chatted on, apparently not paying me any attention. I knew from research that the kobolds—bipedal monsters with the heads of dogs—were often chosen as gatekeepers for their excellent eyesight, but it was my first time seeing them in person.

Huh. I'm surprised. No one has discovered me yet. Looks like acting confident and pretending to be an orc is pretty effective.

I looked up. The monstrous bird with Alicia as its hostage was gliding leisurely through the sky. Well, strictly speaking, it wasn't the sky because we were underground. But the ceiling of this boundless cavern was extremely high, and the bird was almost touching it as it flew.

Okay, I've gotta come up with some kinda rescue plan. Should I go inside the fortress, sneak around while avoiding monsters, then snipe the bird? But if Alicia suddenly falls from that height, she'll have a panic attack. We'll blow our cover.

I kept my mouth shut as I infiltrated the fortress under the watchful eyes of the kobold gatekeepers.

Why in the world did that bird grab Alicia and take her away?

At first, I'd been sure that it was going to take her back into its nest and gobble her up like a snack. I quickly found out that my assumption was wrong, because that bird suddenly swooped down in the middle of its flight and dropped Alicia into a building that seemed to hold many living creatures in captivity. I wasn't too sure what, exactly, these creatures were though.

Calling it a building was a bit of a stretch because it didn't have a roof, but then again, there was no rain underground, so it wouldn't need one anyway. Fences sectioned off an area inside the building, and numerous mysterious creatures jostled around inside it. I had to "swim" through the sea of creatures within the fence, and finally, I somehow managed to locate Alicia inside all the chaos.

"S-Slowe...?!" she whisper-shouted. "What the hell was wrong with that bird?!"

"Hey, you should be happy that it didn't swallow you whole or something. You were in a really tight spot just now, you know that?"

"...I thought I was done for!"

Alicia had lost her cool when we'd met up, and the sight of her calmed my racing heart for some odd reason. Lately, I'd only seen Alicia in "keep calm and carry on" mode, but this was more like the good old Alicia I knew.

"More importantly, Alicia, did you manage to get a good look at the interior of the fortress on your way here?"

"Do you think I was in the mindset to do that?" she asked incredulously. "I really thought I was going to die, you know!"

"Yeah, I guessed as much..."

Before I'd managed to pinpoint Alicia's location, I'd walked around a little bit inside the fortress in the guise of an orc, and this place had given me some serious *déjà vu*.

Remember the monster village in Huzak? They'd established their own little nation as well, but the civilization here was much more advanced. This place wasn't a village—it was more of a town or a city. But at the same time, it was nothing like a human city.

How do I describe it...? It's, well, crude. The straight paths, for example, weren't really straight. They had a weird arc or an angle to them. The stone houses weren't actually houses. They looked more like a pile of big boulders stuck together with mud or something filling the gaps. Buildings didn't have doors. Their entrances were left wide open, and there was no fear of theft or crime whatsoever. Some of the buildings were even in ruin, as if they were the aftermath of some kind of attack.

"Anyway... What should we do about these things?" I muttered.

Those mysterious creatures were all staring at us. They were quadrupedal and were covered in fur from head to toe. They were

short and round, and even their feet were buried inside their fur. We'd appeared out of nowhere, but they weren't wary of us at all and were even nuzzling their faces against us.

Just a theory, but this place is probably like a ranch where the monsters rear these...things.

After a pause, Alicia muttered, "Hey. These guys kinda look like you, don't you think?"

"Excuse me?!" I sputtered, forgetting to keep my voice down in the heat of the moment. *You can't blame me, Alicia's being super rude! She thinks these guys look like me? How?! They look like they're less intelligent than even the carefree, snorting orcs! Actually... Are these things even intelligent? And for your information, I'm not this hideous, thank you very much! Oi, you little cretins, don't get any closer.*

When all was said and done, however, we'd lucked out, since we had ended up in a good hiding spot. At the very least, we had enough time to slowly regain our composure after that fiasco.

"Ah. Slowe. I remember now. This place's a breeding ground for piggrub. Monsters raise them like livestock to use as a food source."

"Piggrub?"

"These things." Alicia gestured. "I mean, you can tell with one look that they're food, right?"

"Wow, you're blunt... You should be grateful; these guys are giving us refuge without any complaints." If these things had made a fuss, we'd be in hot water.

Hearing that, Alicia shoved the head of one piggrub away with a very reluctant look on her face. She seemed to be very agitated by how clingy these creatures were.

I muttered, "Let's not waste time here, we should run. Luckily, I still remember the way back to the entrance, so let's go before I forget."

The upper levels had been crammed with lethal and formidable monsters, but the monsters inside the fortress were on a whole other level. *Giants*, of all creatures, slept in the middle of the paths, for example, and even the thought of fighting those guys was ridiculous.

But Alicia said nothing for a while, as if she were contemplating something. Then, she finally said, "Slowe. Didn't something seem odd to you on your way here?"

"Odd? I mean... I guess the fact that all the monsters I came across were asleep? But that's it."

"Then let's keep going."

"What?"

I couldn't believe my ears. *Keep going? Keep going with what?*

Alicia gave a blunt reply. "I'll go retrieve the Binary Wand."

"...Are you for real?"

I was speechless. It was playing with fire. We didn't even have the map, because Blau had it right now.

"Now that my mind's clear, I'm starting to recall the details of the map. We're currently in the central area in the third district of the fortress. And as you've noticed, the monsters are asleep right now because it's night."

I frowned. "Explain."

"I'm saying that this city follows the same time system as we use on the surface. We came into the dungeon right before noon, so... It's around midnight outside the dungeon. At night, only a handful of guards roam around the fortress keeping watch. Ah, well, the kobold gatekeepers too, I guess, but those guys were slacking off..." Alicia was surprisingly knowledgeable about all this, and she practically glowed with confidence. I could see a blazing flame of determination in her eyes. She concluded, "That means this is the best opening we'll get. We don't have to go out of our way to leave."

...I guess I should've expected this. Alicia's this kind of girl. When push comes to shove, she has much more guts than Shuya.

She nodded to herself. "Let's go. I've memorized the layout of the fortress, and you and I both know this is the best time to act."

Almost as if they were backing up Alicia's words, the strange pigs, piggrubs, all fell asleep at once and began to snort in their sleep.



"Charlotte. If you want to save those two, you should listen to what I say."

Slowe had pursued Alicia and had run into the fortress. When Slowe had crossed the bridge in his suit of armor, for a moment, Charlotte had thought her heart would stop right there, fearing that the monsters might discover his identity.

Blau continued, "Alone, you can't even win against a single monster in these lands. If you want to return to the surface alive, do as I say. I am sure that I have proved my abilities when I saved you just now."

Earlier, when Charlotte had poked her head out from behind the rocky area, her luck had run out and a bargura had noticed her. However, Blau had reacted immediately and slaughtered the monster, rescuing Charlotte from her predicament. That was how the pair had ended up hiding behind this rock further away from the fortress than their previous hiding spot.

Charlotte had thanked Blau for saving her, but that gratitude quickly morphed into suspicion. A monstrous bird with a distinctive pattern had seized Alicia earlier, and now, that very same bird was flying above Blau's head, and Alicia was nowhere to be seen.

In a cool voice, the woman continued, “Just in case, I shall tell you this right now: I am not your enemy. Though as you can see, that little one up there is a monster under my command.” There was no guilt nor hesitation as the woman revealed that fact.

Charlotte said nothing as she inched backwards. This was dangerous—everything was dangerous. She couldn’t get a read on Blau at all. Blau was the adventurer Alicia had hired. But what in the world was the woman thinking?

Seeing Charlotte’s wariness, Blau only smiled meaningfully.

Charlotte’s thoughts were in a mess. “Y-You think you can convince me with that?! You threw Lady Alicia into such a dangerous place!” *What nonsense is this woman spouting?!* Charlotte yelled in her mind.

Blau had kidnapped Alicia with her bird and thrown her to the wolves. Even Slowe was gone now, and both of them were in a land of certain death. Alicia, Blau’s client, was in danger, but the adventurer seemed unruffled. Charlotte couldn’t determine whether the woman was truly an ally or an enemy, but she was sure of one thing: Blau had a goal she’d hidden from the rest of the party.

“Lady Alicia is unharmed. She is a shrewd girl. She has likely memorized all the information this map has to offer about the fortress, and that Dragon Slayer is accompanying her. If they work together, they won’t drop dead that easily.”

“What in the world are you getting at here...?”

“I have only done what is needed to accomplish Lady Alicia’s goals. Charlotte, what do *you* think her goal is?”

Charlotte hesitated. “She’s, well... She wants to retrieve the wand that serves as a symbol of friendship between Cirquista and Daryth...”

Alicia’s aim was the wand. With that achievement under her belt, she’d nip her engagement with Slowe in the bud. That was what Charlotte assumed, anyway, and what Alicia had announced to them all. Charlotte didn’t understand—how would sending Alicia into such a dangerous place contribute in any way?

“Unfortunately, retrieving the wand with our party alone is impossible. Countless adventurers have attempted to reclaim the treasures Looter Stain has pillaged, but less than a handful returned alive. We are a tiny party. Did you really think we could succeed where everyone else failed? Ludicrous.”

“Then... Then why did you accept Alicia’s quest?”

“My goal, you see, is to find and take back mementos of a friend. I *need* Lady Alicia’s map if I want to make it out of the central levels alive. I had my doubts about the contents of her quest at first, but after I saw that map, I knew I had to use this opportunity for my own ends.”

A memory came to the surface of Charlotte's mind. During their journey on the carriage, Slowe had once raised a question. *I really don't know why a renowned adventurer was willing to believe that map's the real deal*, he had said. According to him, one could find fakes everywhere in the world.

"Cirquista sponsors many adventurers to go on expeditions inside this dungeon, and I was once one of their number. You are a retainer of House Denning, so I am sure you are aware of this practice—Cirquista regularly deploys famed adventurers here. These requests, however, were not made through the guild, because this nation wants to monopolize the treasures this dungeon had to offer."

Charlotte hadn't known, actually. But it wasn't like she could admit that in this mood, so she chose to put on an ambiguous expression and listened on without interrupting. She could read social cues like the back of her hand, after all.

Blau then continued, "There is a list of names in this book—all adventurers who came into this dungeon with the aid of Cirquistan royalty are written on it, you see, and naturally, you can find my name as well. That was how I earned Lady Alicia's trust."

Charlotte furrowed her brows. She had noticed and been puzzled by Alicia's abnormal amount of faith in a stranger, especially after the woman's actions at the border. Now, it all made sense.

"I had a connection to the royal family of Cirquista, and I also happened to have a personal connection to Lady Alicia from the past. If possible, I wish for her happiness."

"...And that's why you threw her into that place?" Charlotte wasn't convinced.

"I made sure to drop her off in a safe spot. I wanted to open her eyes and make her realize that retrieving a wand from such a hazardous place was impossible. And then, just like I thought, that boy went to save her. I want to play matchmaker by making those two stick together."

"Matchmaker?"

"I observed them during our journey, and this was my conclusion: these two might fall in love as long as there was a catalyst. The rumors said that their relationship was beyond repair, but that didn't seem to be the case at all. Often, the opinion of a bystander is different from those involved, and that was true for these two."

Charlotte wouldn't have predicted Blau's plans, not even in her wildest dreams. In her eyes, romantic affairs seemed to be the last thing on this adventurer's mind. She had assumed—and yes, she knew this was rather rude—that the woman was a prude.

Blau shrugged. "A girl and a boy working together alone inside a dungeon is a recipe for love and strong bonds. I hoped that this might

happen. There are many adventurer couples brought together by all the dangers they conquered as a pair.”

Throughout the conversation, distant howls and roars could be heard from the direction of the fortress. Unfortunately, Charlotte couldn’t spare any attention for the area where Slowe and Alicia were at.

The girl sucked in a deep breath to calm herself. “I don’t think anyone would be in the mood for love in a place like this.”

“The environment will give them the biggest boost. Extreme circumstances tend to cause...*curious* misunderstandings. That is what my personal experience has taught me. Actually, I think my environment back then was rather similar to those two at the moment.”

As one would expect, Charlotte had no clue what this woman was going on about. She definitely couldn’t approve of Blau’s matchmaking plans either. *She* was Slowe’s girlfriend.

“Why in the world are you doing this...?”

“As a Cirquistan princess, Lady Alicia will have to marry someone eventually, no matter what her opinion is. However, the candidates are all likely scum, just like in the past. That was why I thought he was the only one I could entrust her to.”

“I don’t think that’s what Lady Alicia wants, though...”

“Even if that is the case... I have a duty to help her reach the best future possible.”

“...A duty? Why?”

“A long time has passed since then, but... I was actually the one who put Slowe Denning’s name forward as a candidate to become her fiancé.”

Charlotte blinked.



“...Don’t do anything stupid, Slowe.”

“I-I know, okay?”

We were deep inside enemy territory, but we weren’t going to run—instead, we headed straight for the treasury. Personally, I thought Alicia had lost her damn mind.

But as we advanced, I gradually began to see why she’d been so confident that we’d make it. Luck was on our side because we’d infiltrated the fortress at night. All the monsters present seemed to be either absentminded or dozing off.

The second reason that’d pushed her forward was our monster disguise. The clank of metal followed us as we marched inside the fortress in the guise of knights in armor. We blended in very well because there were monsters clad in armor and helmets everywhere.

Many monsters dabbled in smithing, so that was likely the reason for this fashion trend. Though it was night, the clanging of hammer against steel echoed throughout the city.

All that aside... This place is spectacular, in ways both good and bad. I let out a small sigh. I hadn't stopped to sightsee during my search for Alicia, but now that I had time to admire the scenery, it was pretty impactful.

Monsters wandered around the streets, drinking, eating, or even sleeping in the middle of the paths. Public order didn't exist at all. I spotted an orc hammering steel like a blacksmith, the monster sending sparks flying with each strike like the real deal. Their activities were nearly identical to human societies. This civilization was much more advanced than Huzak's village.

"Oink..." I snorted.

"Hey. Why did you make that sound?" Alicia sounded appalled.

"I'm pretending to be an orc, oink."

"...Didn't I *just* tell you to refrain from doing stupid things?"

"I know, I know. It's just a joke."

Alicia glared daggers at me before resuming her march, and I followed her.

Huh, wow. Look at that thing. A structure at the heart of the fortress towered over the rest of the building. Like all other architecture here, it was made from stone. I was willing to bet that it was a castle of sorts, though it was a poor imitation of one. The higher parts of the structure were narrower, and I could tell that the monsters had invested a significant amount of effort into its design.

All the paths in the fortress seemed to lead there, and the monsters heading in its direction seemed to be well-off, judging from their appearance. *Influential figures must live in that castle. Which means...the infamous slime must live there too.*

As we walked, I heard a gruff voice call out to us. "Heeey, ya puny suits o' armor over there! This ain't a place for weaklings like y'all!"

It was a giant sprawled out in the middle of the path. *Sheesh, this guy's huge. He's probably many times my height if he gets up.*

Alicia urged me. "Hurry, Slowe."

It'd seem suspicious if I kept staring at the guy. I followed Alicia's lead and quickened my pace.

Then I found another monster looking at me—an orc with red-copper-colored skin, not unlike the molten-hot magma you'd find inside a volcano. *What's with these guys? Do we smell like humans or something?*

The pompous orc wore a suit of armor proudly, but it looked more like sheets of metal haphazardly slapped together with some kind of glue. They held a weapon with a large, sweeping blade, and they had

a shield attached to their hip. On the surface world, they might have been strong enough to lead as the boss of an orc gang, but inside the central levels of Demon Land, they were only mediocre.

But that orc wasn't the only one sizing us up.

Another monster yelled at us, "Look at this, ya no-good orc! I stole from some 'venturers! Jealous?"

It was a brutish ogre wearing the valuables he'd stolen on a rope draped across his body that jangled with his every step. He looked like a formidable opponent; sharp fangs protruded out of his mouth, and judging by his stride down the middle of his path, it looked like he might dare any who crossed his path to challenge him.

"Alicia," I muttered, "someone's picking a fight with us."

"Just ignore them all, obviously." No sooner had she said that than she let out a squeak. "Those guys are around..."

The barlgura who'd indulged their bloodthirst in the upper levels had passed out on the road, sound asleep. Close-up, these things truly looked like gorillas. The putrid stench of blood wafted from them.

We tried to make as little noise as possible while we passed by the pack. From time to time, we'd hide behind something to steady our breathing and the thumping of our hearts.

"Hey, Alicia... You seem to know a lot about the structure of this fortress."

"I read that bulky book over and over every single day back at Kirsch, so." She shrugged.

Apparently, during her hermit phase, she'd scrutinized the map and had strategized deep into the night.

"...Since we're here, Alicia. I want to ask you something."

"What?"

"Why do you trust Blau so much? What's her goal in the first place? I don't want to die without regrets, so just tell me already."

She paused. "Blau was one of the adventurers that we, the Cirquistan royalty, sent into this labyrinth. She's one of the creators of that map."

"Ah, I see. Since she was one of the adventurers chosen and sponsored by Cirquista, there was no need to do another background check on her."

"Yeah. After all, my homeland did all the legwork verifying her trustworthiness for me."

According to Alicia, Blau's name was listed inside the book cover, along with the woman's signature, which gave proof of her claims that she'd been here before. It was this that had convinced Alicia to trust her.

She continued, "Blau's goal is to retrieve a memento of a friend who perished inside this labyrinth."

I blinked in surprise. “You’d tell me that much?”

“You’re the one who said you wanted to die with no regrets.”

“That was just a joke. Huh, she’s surprisingly sentimental.”

“That friend of Blau was Louis, by the way. Yes, your uncle.

Surprised?”

I froze like a statue. I couldn’t believe my ears. “You must be joking.”

“No, I’m not.”

Alicia then explained that Blau and Uncle Louis had both been adventurers sponsored by Cirquista to explore the labyrinth, and they’d gone into this place together.

She finished that explanation with, “Blau joined this expedition to find Louis’s keepsake.”

“The Enchanted Sword, Prisma, right?” I muttered slowly.

“Yep. You didn’t expect that, did you?”

“How could I ever have seen that coming? I would’ve never predicted that those two were connected in some way...”

Louis Denning, the man who’d abandoned House Denning and who my father had often grumbled about whenever he was drunk. The seat of Duke Denning had been practically tossed into my uncle’s lap, but he never once thought of claiming it as his own. The life of an adventurer called to him. I knew he’d gone missing in the Labyrinth of Cirquista, but who would’ve thought that the kingdom itself had been his patron? And Blau had even been his comrade!

Everything seemed to click now. “So that’s why she had Shakhtar’s Sword of Light...”

“What about it? Are you going to demand that she return it since it used to belong to House Denning?”

“No. It belongs to her now. I see... So she was Louis’s companion...”

I had to admit I felt a little relieved—even happy—when I heard that. *Even I left Louis to gather dust in the depths of my memory, but someone still holds him close to her heart...*

We marched on in the guise of monsters, our identities safely hidden behind the plate armor we wore.

As Alicia predicted, most of the monsters inside the fortress were sound asleep. The ones awake were sluggish and drowsy, so only a handful of monsters so much as spared a glance at the two walking suits of armor.

Alicia and I were so close. A pleasant, gentle fragrance tickled my nose—it was Alicia’s scent.

“Hm? Why are you just standing there? Let’s get a move on.”

I shook my head. “It’s nothing...” *No. This is just the suspension*

bridge effect. It has to be. My heart would never race when I see Alicia. She's even wearing armor, to boot!

"Wait, Slowe, we're here."

I skidded to a halt. "*Here?*"

It was a ramshackle hut that didn't even have windows. If I were just strolling around, I would've missed it because it seemed so insignificant. In fact, I'd completely overlooked it until Alicia stopped me. But according to her, this house was the treasury that only the most knowledgeable adventurers knew of.

I stared at it with doubt in my eyes. "You're joking, right?"

"It didn't catch your eye either, did it? But that's the whole point. They designed it that way on purpose."

Looter Stain was a cautious slime, and Alicia mentioned that Stain's biggest nightmare was a rebellion started by its fellow monsters. In the infamous central levels of the Labyrinth of Cirquista, the monsters were all filled with ambition. Stain had secured its status as boss by killing the original ruler. And so it followed that the Stain feared that one day, its subordinates might attempt an uprising against *it* in turn. Powerful weapons were strictly given to only those it could trust with its life. And to prevent other monsters from getting their hands on its looted weapons, it'd stashed them away in an inconspicuous place like this.

Alicia muttered to herself, "Let's see... If we want to get in, the next step is..."

The moment we entered the treasury, a vast array of weapons gleaming through the darkness awaited us. I'd assumed this sort of place would be heavily guarded, but Stain's collection was just sort of...left lying around in the open, as if inviting any and all passersby to admire it. Taken by surprise at the lack of security, I gaped for a moment.

"So *this* is that infamous slime's precious treasury, huh...?" I muttered to myself.

These treasures and weapons were stored inside display cases made of glass—this loot included all sorts of fabled items, their names immortalized for generations in legend. There was a black ring that could conjure illusions in one small case, and inside another larger one I saw a cursed knight's suit of armor.

This place was a literal treasure trove filled with every kind of equipment one could imagine, just like the rumors had said. Though Stain was greedy for all kinds of loot, equipment—especially weapons—with special powers were especially attractive to it.

"If we touch them, monsters will jump out," Alicia warned.

"That makes sense. Surely they can't be *that* careless with these.

But sheesh... This is crazy.”

The artifacts were all lined up neatly, like some kind of weird museum or something. Retrieving even one item in this collection would likely earn us the title of “hero” for taking back the booty of the accursed slime.

But we had our sights set on one item in particular.

After a pause, Alicia hissed, “Slowe.”

“Yeah, I know. That’s definitely what we’re after.”

We found it immediately because it was on display more prominently than everything else.

A wand rested upon the velvet that lined a glass case—or to be more specific, two wands, white and light blue, coiling around each other to form one wand. This was the symbol of friendship between our two nations. If the Binary Wand was returned to its rightful place, our two nations would find prosperity—that was what the Great Spirits had promised each other.

I took a step forward to get a better look, when—

“Are y’all interested in my collection?”

An innocuous voice echoed out, and both Alicia and I froze on the spot.



I turned my head around slowly with dread. There, I saw a full suit of obsidian-black armor, which I'd assumed was nothing more than one of the numerous treasures on display earlier. The helmet cranked open, and something slithered out of it—a slime monster.

The voice from earlier rang out again. "I've been watchin' y'all for a while. Whatcha doin'?"

"W-We're just having a look around..." I stammered.

"I've never heard of an orc interested in wands, though."

Damn. I can't argue against that. "I-I just got curious, that's all."

"And, just outta curiosity, are ya plannin' ta steal a wand from my treasury? Didn't know there were such amusin' orcs out there. Guys like you two show up from time to time. Especially after the barlgura blow off some steam upstairs and come back. And so I thought, why, if I hung around here, evil humans like you lot would probably jump right into my trap, like moths to a flame. It's really funny!"

The slime jiggled as it talked to us. It looked grotesque and weak. But looks were deceiving—this creature had escaped even the clutches of our Guardian Knight in the past.

"Alicia! Run for it!" I roared.

We didn't have the luxury of time to chat with that slime. I smashed the glass and snatched up the wand inside. Almost instantly, I unleashed a dual-element spell of water and wind that destroyed the wall, creating an escape route. Of course, I didn't miss the chance to toss a few offensive spells in the slime's direction.

Looter Stain's strength stemmed from a magic item—King's Providence, which manifested a protective barrier around its owner. *Let's see whether that thing lives up to its reputation.*

I kept my eyes peeled as my spells struck Stain, waiting for the precise moment of contact.

A barrier manifested spontaneously to protect Stain, a clear demonstration of the relic's power. No one—no, *nothing* would get through the barrier so long as the Stain wielded the King's Providence. A dazzling barrier blocked the spell, but that wasn't the only thing—it didn't just block the spell, it *reflected* it. The spell bounced off the ceiling of the building and sailed past me, missing me by a hair.

"Gah!" I yelped.

Stain stood stock still inside the barrier and announced in a low voice, "The hunt begins. I hope ya entertain me at least a little bit, my prey."



"D-Details! More details, please!"

This adventurer was one of the people behind Master Slowe's

engagement with Lady Alicia?! Charlotte exclaimed in her mind.

It'd come like a bolt from the blue. Charlotte would've never predicted that the adventurer Alicia had hired had such ties with all of them. Perhaps the woman was lying. But Charlotte thought that couldn't be the truth. When she reflected on all of Blau's actions so far, she found that she trusted Blau enough to give her some benefit of the doubt. The dangers Slowe and Alicia faced slipped from her mind, and Charlotte focused on Blau's confession instead.

"Back when Cirquista sponsored me to enter the labyrinth, I had many opportunities to interact with the royalty of Cirquista, including Lady Alicia. Knowing that they were likely sending us adventurers to our inevitable demise, they showered us with hospitality. So no, this isn't my first encounter with Lady Alicia. I knew her very well, once."

"But Lady Alicia didn't seem to recognize you..."

"My appearance has changed since then. My hair used to be long, and since I was in the presence of royalty, I made a more concerted effort to dress appropriately for such an occasion. All high-ranking adventurers know the kind of presentation that would gain the trust of others. Though there were a few outliers, nearly all my party members back then at least had that much common sense. It was such a long time ago... Lady Alicia was very young, and besides which, Cirquistan royalty meet many new faces every day. I wouldn't be surprised if she had forgotten me."

The rocky area had plenty of natural seats available. Darkness filled the dungeon—only the glowgrass beneath their feet and the light spilling out of the fortress illuminated the area around them.

Blau gazed at the fortress, but she seemed to look straight through it as nostalgia whisked her away into her memories. "We had a little too much spare time before our expedition, and that was when I got to know Lady Alicia. She was just as lionhearted as a child as she is now, and she seemed to take a liking to us adventurers. Day in, day out, we would make our preparations, and she started visiting us several times every day. That was when we learned that the Cirquistan royal family was looking for a fiancé for Lady Alicia."

Charlotte listened attentively, not offering any words of her own.

"We were rather concerned for Lady Alicia's future, and we were all against a political marriage. We adventurers value freedom above all else. To us, there is no greater crime than arranging for someone else's marriage without their consent, especially for one so young. Cirquista is a major power in the south, and we understand that such power comes at a price, but we wanted to do what we could to secure a bright future for Lady Alicia. That was when we began discussing any potential children we knew personally that would fit the criteria. We were half joking, to be honest."

Blau pulled out Shakhtar's Sword of Light from the sheath on her hip. Charlotte was familiar with it as well, since it'd been one of the prized possessions of House Denning.

The woman continued, "I think you know what happened next. In my party, there was one man who had a most unusual background—Louis Denning was born to House Denning of Daryth. Though he was born into prestige, he was an odd man who chose the life of an adventurer instead. He was the one who told us about Slowe Denning, a perfect boy for the position."

"Lord Louis did that..." Charlotte hadn't expected she'd hear that name here. He'd also left a profound mark in her memories. She'd heard that he loved jokes, and out of all the members of House Denning, he'd been the closest to Slowe. But then he left on his expedition in the Labyrinth of Cirquista and never returned.

But now, Charlotte was in that very dungeon, accompanied by one of Louis's former comrades. She almost felt as if this were a fever dream.

"The betrothal between Lady Alicia and Slowe Denning happened quickly. Though, in the end, he transformed into a wayward child, and it was called off."

Charlotte really couldn't defend her master on this matter.

Blau shrugged. "This is why I feel responsible for Lady Alicia. And I must say, I was quite shocked when you two appeared as Lady Alicia was climbing into the carriage. I almost thought it was fate."

Charlotte took a deep breath to calm herself. "I see. I understand your relationship with her now. But I still don't see why you threw her into the fortress."

"By forcing them into that situation where they have no hope of succeeding, they will have no choice but to give up on retrieving that wand. Making it out of that fortress might be a pain, but Lady Alicia has committed its structure to memory, and Slowe Denning has the power to protect them both. As they overcome the crisis together, they might grow much closer in the meantime."

A moment of silence hung between them.

Blau concluded, "As you can see, I have two goals. The first is to retrieve Louis's memento, Prisma. The second is to play matchmaker for the two of them. I think those two will get together. They just need a little push in the right direction. Don't you agree, Charlotte?"

Charlotte's face, however, darkened. If Blau's plans succeeded, it would be ugly, because Charlotte and Slowe were already a couple. Alicia would snatch away the boy she liked right from her grasp.

The adventurer was oblivious to the storm she'd caused. "I am sure two suits of armor will walk back across the bridge in about an hour. Rest assured."

No. I can't let it happen. I refuse! Charlotte thought fiercely. *I need to go in there immediately and save them before that happens!*

The girl had to abort her mission immediately, however, at Blau's next words.

"Charlotte, you need to hide. Something is not right." Blau grabbed Charlotte's arm and took cover behind a rock.

The monsters in the fortress were making a commotion. The bird hovering above the two swooped down and flew in circles above Blau's head, screeching. They were incomprehensible noises to Charlotte, but Blau's complexion turned as pale as ash.

"My bird just told me...that humans have infiltrated the treasury and have stolen Stain's loot," Blau muttered in disbelief.

Charlotte felt as if her brain was going to explode from information overload.



"Seriously, I swear, I nearly died again!" Next to me, Alicia heaved, her shoulders moving up and down as she muttered, "I'm going to have a heart attack at this rate."

We'd sprinted at top speed to escape the monsters. I steadied my breathing and panted, "Wow. We're alive."

"Looks like Lady Luck hasn't abandoned us just yet," Alicia said.

The monsters had already discovered that we were humans, so we'd ditched the armor somewhere to rid ourselves of the dead weight and escape.

I paused. "I'm surprised you knew about such an escape route." I thought back to our mad dash out of the fortress, realizing just how lucky we were to have kept our heads attached to our shoulders.

Alicia led us to a hidden garden tucked away within the settlement, where a well sat in its center. The well was covered with a lid, but Alicia shoved it aside, revealing a darkness that stretched all the way down. Upon further inspection, I spotted a rope ladder that apparently led all the way to the bottom. I hadn't had time to so much as guess where this well would take us when Alicia climbed in without hesitation. Throwing all caution to the wind, I followed her down.

"This is a secret path that a dwarf that Cirquista dispatched ages ago used to get in and out of the labyrinth."

The passage that led outside the fortress lay in the garden of an abandoned forge, though calling anything in this place a "garden" was charitable. In the past, a dwarf used to act as a guide for humans, and that passage had been their secret entrance. Apparently, even adventurers didn't know of it—only Cirquistian royalty did. And now, we were at the exit of that secret route.

"Huh," I muttered, "looks like Cirquista got pretty creative about

conquering this dungeon. In any case, what're we going to do now?"

According to Alicia, she'd already planned our emergency escape route the moment she'd started heading towards the treasury. It'd have been nice if she'd tipped me off about this backup plan beforehand, but we'd managed to shake off all those monsters, so I supposed I could let that slide.

But she didn't answer me.

Dread crept into my heart. "Oi, don't tell me, you..."

"I don't know." She glared at me defiantly. "My knowledge only goes so far!"

I stared at her numbly.

She sighed. "Who knows what's waiting for us down here?"

Alicia had known about the well that led to the escape route, but that was it. She didn't know much—or anything, really—about where the passage led to. That we managed to escape the fortress was already a great accomplishment.

The tunnel was dark and damp. I felt as if we'd returned to the upper levels—a normal dungeon with a complex network of paths. We would have to sneak down the narrow passage like two moles once again.

Unfortunately, I wasn't an experienced adventurer like Blau, but I put on an air of confidence to reassure Alicia. "Well, thanks to you, we've gotten this far," I declared. "Now it's my turn to take the reins."

We didn't know what awaited us, but it wasn't like we had a choice. From time to time, we'd take small breaks as we pressed on. Alicia followed me without any complaints.

"It's pretty hot and humid in here," she commented.

"Yeah..."

I still had plenty of stamina and power reserves left, but I worried about Alicia. I was a Denning—even in a nightmare scenario like this, I wouldn't fold under the pressure. But Alicia was an ordinary girl, her status as royalty notwithstanding.

A drop of water trickled down the ceiling and splashed on my neck, startling me out of my thoughts. On reflex, I let out a weird yelp.

Alicia gasped before she muttered, "Hey, don't scare me like that."

"Sorry, my bad."

At one point we had turned a corner and run headlong into some monsters. All parties involved had been rather shaken, but we'd kept our guard up knowing that we were in enemy territory, and I'd reacted faster. In terms of strength, the monsters here were around the caliber of those in the upper levels.

The stronger guys must be inside that fortress. Blau also mentioned

that only weaklings who aren't worthy of being inside the fortress live in the caves and tunnels. The "weaklings" in the central levels are likely the standard in the upper levels.

"Hey, did you hear that?" Alicia asked nervously.

"A monster somewhere probably rolled over in its sleep or something."

I could feel tremors in the ground. A gigantic creature was moving around somewhere.

This dungeon was a hellish place that gobbled up the lives of countless adventurers—and the place my uncle had disappeared. The vague memory of a colossal monster I'd seen inside the fortress that was bigger than the average house came to mind inexplicably. I shuddered.

"I'm fine. Finders, keepers. You eat that, Alicia."

"But you must be hungry too..."

Alicia had found some plants growing on the side of the passage that bore edible fruit. I wasn't as knowledgeable as Charlotte, but I knew how to tell what was and wasn't safely edible, at the very least.

"If my stomach's full, I'll get sleepy," I insisted. "Right now, I want to maintain my focus."

Alicia was probably convinced, because she shoveled down the fruit. She grimaced—it must've been sour.

I found my thoughts wandering from topic to topic in the wake of the silence. From that slime monster, to Charlotte, to how the barrier reflected my spell. Meat. The Great Spirit of Wind. Kirsch Mage Institute. Alicia's state of health. *I'm hungry*. Leaving school without permission. Staying off campus without permission. *I wanna eat meat*.

We trudged on in silence. We shared no words. We hadn't said it out loud, but we were in silent mutual agreement that conversation would only drain our energy. And so we focused on single-mindedly keeping our feet moving forward, believing—*hoping*—that light awaited us at the end of the tunnel.

No matter what, we'd managed it. We'd shaken that slime monster off our trail and had regained the Binary Wand. We'd achieved our goal. *We just won't talk about how we also have a swarm of monsters looking for us because of that.*

During one of our short breaks where we paused our progress, Alicia plopped down onto the ground as she wiped the sweat on her forehead with the back of her hand.

"Hey, Slowe," she muttered, "do you think we can make it out alive?"

I hesitated. "Oh, we'll be fine. There's nothing to worry about."

“I’m pretty sure that by now, Cirquista has found out that I snuck out of school and have come to this dungeon. They must’ve discovered that I smuggled out the map as well. Which means they’re probably going to send a rescue team, but I don’t think they’ll make it in time...”

“Don’t be so paranoid. We’ll be fine, I swear. Okay, let’s get a move on. Sitting around here won’t help us at all. Do you still have enough energy to stand up?” I offered a hand to Alicia.

“...Yeah.” Without protest, Alicia took my hand and got onto her feet.

I could feel her soft and warm skin against mine. *I’m not alone.* With that thought, I felt a tiny boost to my dried-up reserves of energy. I’d assumed that conversations were a waste of breath, but both of us changed our minds after that short break. Staying silent in such devastating circumstances was only going to drive us insane.

After a pause, Alicia muttered, “Hey, do you think Miss Charlotte got out safely?”

“I told her to head out of the dungeon the moment she got separated from me.”

“Huh. You trust her a lot. But Blau’s going to come looking for me... How’s Miss Charlotte going to escape alone?”

“She has an ace hidden up her sleeve. I bet you’d never guess what it is.”

“Oh, really? Well, I suppose I’ll ask her if I ever get to see her again.”

The Great Spirit of Wind had declared that they didn’t mind exposing their identity in an emergency. Judging by the strength of the monsters in the upper and central levels, they could bulldoze their way through easily. That guy had mentioned that they wanted to blow some steam, and a dramatic escape from this dungeon would be a perfect opportunity for them. *They even bragged about how the upper levels were such a breeze for them, so I have faith in them.*

If they returned to their true form, rumors might arise about an outlandish cat inside the Labyrinth of Cirquista, but there were always more solutions than problems. We could just say they were one of the monsters Blau had tamed or something.

I didn’t have the sun to rely on to gauge time, but I could’ve guessed that maybe one day had passed since we first set out through the mines. We walked on. Alicia’s pace had slowed considerably. She also spoke less as time went on, yet she never once complained. But there was a limit to anyone’s stamina, even hers. *We can’t keep going. We need to sleep.*

“Hey, Alicia. Let’s stop and get some shut-eye.”

We were in luck. Right as I'd thought that, we came across a perfect place to rest. A carpet of shriveled gray grass lay arranged into a comfortable-looking pile—a monster around the same size as us had likely slept in it.

“How could I ever fall asleep in a place like this?” She sighed.

“We haven't run into any monsters for a while, so we've probably come to a place tucked far enough away that even monsters don't loiter. We need to get some sleep today—ah, I mean, I don't know that for sure. But at any rate, we need to rest, or else our bodies will give out before we make it out of here.”

I flopped onto the ground. Alicia plopped down next to me. Our shoulders were touching, but I didn't pay it any mind anymore. We were so exhausted that we didn't have it in us to feel shy. We were in enemy territory, so we'd take turns. One would sleep for a short time while the other kept watch. That was the agreement we made.

“You could've just left me to fend for myself when that big bird took me away, you know...”

“Don't be silly. I could never abandon you in a dangerous place like this.”

The thought of running away and leaving Alicia behind hadn't once crossed my mind. My body had moved before my mind could think. I would make the same choice even if I got a second chance.

“Why... Why're you willing to go so far for me...? You were even willing to come to the labyrinth—to this *hell* with me...” Alicia hugged her knees as she sat. She hung her head.

Our shoulders were still against each other, and from this angle, I couldn't get a glimpse of her expression. “You should listen to yourself. This is a problem that involves both of us, remember?”

“...No, it's *my* problem, not yours. I mean, you could've just said 'no' to our betrothal, after all.”

“I guess that's an option, but what will you do if that happens? Are you just going to let other people decide your marriage for you without your consent?”

“Never. But... I'm starting to think that maybe, if this was the alternative, that might have been the better choice...”

This was the first time Alicia revealed a chink in her armor. During our carriage journey and even inside the Labyrinth of Cirquista, Alicia had always put on a strong, brave front.

I didn't know what to say.

Alicia didn't offer any more words either, because she fell asleep. I could hear her soft, steady breathing. Something fell gently onto my shoulder—Alicia's head. Her body leaned against mine, and I could feel her weight on me. I didn't struggle, lending her my shoulder without a word.

The stubborn, prideful Alicia was finally willing to break down her walls a little. A wave of relief washed over me. Until now, I'd always had the impression that she was pushing herself too hard.

And... She asked me why I'm helping her. Shouldn't that be obvious? I was the one who tore apart our initial engagement because of my own selfish wishes. I owe her this much.

I let out a long sigh. Things were looking grim, to be honest. No one would come to our rescue. Blau probably would've never anticipated that Alicia and I would go to steal the Binary Wand instead of heading straight out once we realized how dangerous our situation was. Alicia's knowledge had been invaluable, but the actual map was still in the woman's hands. If only we'd held on to it... *Ugh, hindsight's always crystal clear.*

I turned my head and looked at Alicia. *I should've stopped her once I'd caught up to her in the piggrub den and taken her outside to meet up with Blau first. That woman's a top-class adventurer. She seems like someone who can overcome hardships without as much as a twitch in her face.*

I wondered whether Cirquista had truly discovered Alicia's destination like she'd assumed. *If I had known this was going to happen... Haaah, maybe we should've tried to come up with another strategy instead of coming into this place.*

"Sorry, I slept the whole time..."

"Nah, it's fine. I also fell asleep."

"Really? You slept as well?"

"...Yeah, I got some good rest thanks to you."

Alicia had slept for around two hours. As for me, I'd repeated a cycle of shallow naps for a few minutes then staying awake for a while. I'd kept my guard up so that I could react instantly if something happened. To be honest, it wasn't much of an issue. Members of House Denning could function perfectly well even if we didn't sleep for a couple of days. Compared to the training camp I'd experienced as a child, being able to sneak in a few minutes of sleep every now and then made it much more tolerable.

That's why I'm totally fine, I told myself firmly.

"Hey, Slowe... When they heard about our betrothal, the people at Kirsch went crazy, didn't they? I felt as if I'd become a celebrity."

"You *were* a celebrity of sorts to begin with."

We made small talk as we walked on. Sometimes, we'd talk about Kirsch. Sometimes, we'd talk about our lectures, or even what we did during the weekends. It was all trifling things.

"Hey, when we get back to school, let's go to the campus café together."

“Sure. But can Charlotte come along too?”

“Of course.” Despite the situation, she giggled. “I can’t wait to see how the students at Kirsch will react when they see us getting along for once.”

Probably around half a day had passed since we’d made it out of that fortress. Alicia seemed to be putting on a cheery act after she got some sleep, but it was clear that she was faking it ’til she made it on what little energy she could dredge up. The scenery was monotonous—dim, gloomy walls that seemed to stretch on forever.

Alicia had only had a few hours of rest, and it’d been in the least ideal environment possible. She was clearly wasting away, and soon, the silence outweighed our conversations.

“Alicia!” My eyes widened when Alicia nearly tripped, and I quickly grabbed her hand to steady her.

She tightened her grip around my hand. “Thanks,” she said at length.

We’d been at odds for the longest time. But when stuck in excruciating circumstances like these, we couldn’t stop ourselves from depending on each other.

After a moment of silence, she muttered, “Sorry for dragging you into this mess.”

“I’ve told you so many times that I knew what I was walking into. I followed you because I wanted to, not because I was forced to.”

“Yeah, you did...”

We were running away, isolated from the rest of the world.

Today, the number of monster corpses to my name was eight. Though I wasn’t too sure whether it was still “today,” because our sense of time had already gone haywire. Probably due to my fatigue, my spellcasting wasn’t as clean and smooth as usual either. It was a miracle that we were both still unharmed.

Just like the “night” before, we found another “bed” that a monster had probably slept in.

I was about to suggest that we sleep before something cut those words short—Alicia had reached her limits, and she collapsed onto the ground. She’d gotten sick.

I frowned. “Wait. You have a fever, don’t you?”

“I’m fine... More importantly, let’s keep going, Slowe...”

Health and physical condition were top priorities in a dungeon. Even Blau, who’d chosen to bring along the bare minimum rations, had packed plenty of medicine.

I placed my hand against Alicia’s forehead and for a moment, panic tore at my heart, but I kept a cool face. The unique fog that hung over this dungeon must have caused it. These were the exact

symptoms Blau had warned us about.

“No. You should sleep for a while and try to recover as much energy as possible.”

From behind Alicia, I placed my arms around her small frame and enveloped her body with mine as much as I could before closing my eyes.

“...You’re right.”

I’m only doing this to prevent heat loss from our bodies. I’m not doing this because I have unsavory intentions. Alicia didn’t voice any protest either.

We couldn’t be picky about such things, because we were hanging on to life by a single, fragile thread. I hugged Alicia tighter so that she wouldn’t lose heat to the environment during her fever.

Alicia, hanging her head, muttered, “You know, Slowe, I’m thankful to you.”

“You still haven’t slept...?”

“I mean, this might be my deathbed...”

“Ugh, don’t jinx yourself by saying stuff like that. But... Hey, did my ears play tricks on me just now? Were you in support of our new betrothal? Seriously?”

“...N-No, that’s not it. I’m not talking about that... I’m thanking you for how you went, well, crazy and got our first engagement dissolved...”

I couldn’t believe what she was saying. I knew that after our betrothal had crashed down in flames, Alicia and those involved with her had been the target of harassment in Cirquista as “royalty with the worst judgment ever.”

She muttered, “And yeah, I did experience some horrible things because of you. I was a clown in the eyes of my siblings, and for a long time, I swore I’d never, ever forgive you. But then, one day, it came to me. I should be the one to decide my future, not other people... If our engagement hadn’t been broken, I...would’ve never realized that fact...”

“...Yeah. I think so too.”

“So, Slowe. Stop trying to sacrifice your life to save me because you feel guilt towards me or for some stupid reason like that... Okay?”

When she finished that sentence, her breathing slowed, and she fell asleep.

I recalled something Blau had said to me a while ago.

“Lady Alicia is much stronger than you can ever imagine.”

“...I’m so sorry, Slowe.”

“Don’t be. It’s not your fault, it’s the situation we’re in.”

The next day, I carried Alicia on my back as I walked on. She

barely weighed anything. Her breaths tickled my neck, and I couldn't help but be distracted. I could feel her fragile warmth on my back.

I'd long lost track of how much time had passed. I could have sworn we were just going round and round in circles, making no progress at all.

"I... In my homeland, I had to see and talk to so many potential marriage candidates that I eventually got fed up. That's why I ran away to Daryth, you know."

"...Huh."

"My family must have thought that if I snagged myself a Daryth nobleman that that would work out in our favor too, so that's probably why they let me come here. Though, well, I didn't find even a single one that fit my standards..."

"What about Shuya? You guys are pretty close, aren't you? If we're talking about potential marriage candidates, don't you think he'd suit you best?"

There was a pause. "We're just friends. The guy owes me something, that's all. But huh. A potential husband... Well, at Kirsch, it would be..."

Silence.

Neither of us said anything else, our breaths the only sound that echoed inside the passage.

Finally, Alicia muttered, "Well...that doesn't really matter anymore, I guess."

"What...doesn't?"

"Nothing, just ignore me... Hey, is it just me, or is the wind getting stronger down this way?"

"Oh, you're right."

I looked down the passage we were walking along. At the very end of the path, light shone; it wasn't natural, given that we were so deep underground. Warily, I hefted Alicia a little higher on my back and kept walking. The path eventually opened up into a vast, sprawling area, as if someone had used a giant spoon to dig out a chunk of the rock in the center of the network of tunnels. Not only that, but judging by all the holes in the rock walls, it seemed that several dozens of passages—like the one we'd come from—were connected to this area.

I observed our surroundings while keeping my guard up, but I couldn't sense anything in our vicinity, living or otherwise. *What in the world is this place?*

When I stepped forward, I bumped my foot into something hard—a skeleton, no, a whole *pile* of bones and skeletons. *This is... I can't even imagine how many corpses it'd take to make a pile this big...* Weapons stood impaled into the ground like grisly makeshift stakes, and even a

number of books littered the ground. These looked similar to the map Alicia had brought along with us.

I furrowed my eyebrows. "Are there other copies of that map you have?"

"Well... We update it once every few years, so yeah."

"Then... It's obvious. You weren't the first one. Other Cirquistan royalty handed out these maps to adventurers and tried to monopolize all the wealth and treasures here."

Countless high-ranking adventurers must have met their grim end here. I didn't know whether the adventurers had been killed first before their corpses had been dumped here or whether they'd fallen at the hands of some ghastly creature inside this chamber, but... *Looks like we found a literal dead end.*

An adventurer cemetery, that was the best way to describe it. The bodies of countless lives lost due to ambition lay scattered around carelessly, and in one corner was a mountain of trash—miscellaneous baggage the adventurers had left behind after they'd been chased here. Its size was impressive, to say the least. I craned my neck towards the top of the towering structure.

A chair made from bones balanced precariously on the very tip, and on it sat a human skeleton. For some reason, that skeleton posed in such a way that it appeared deep in thought.

I took a deep breath. "Hey, you. Skeleton monster up there. I know you're spying on us."

The rattling of bones echoed out as the skeleton replied, "Wow, I'm surprised! You actually realized I'm alive!"

An arrow shaft stuck out from the area around its ribs, and if it had flesh, the tip would've pierced its heart. Adventurers who had tenacious lingering attachments or regrets at the moment of their death would sometimes become monsters. You'd hear stories of that everywhere. This skeleton must've been one such creature.

The skeleton continued, "Yours Truly is a miserable skeleton who works as a gatekeeper here!" The skeleton was talkative—almost as if it were a human. "And for your information, my duties include murdering just-as-miserable adventurers like you two. Aaand that'll be all for introductions, so let's begin, challengers!"

The skeleton moved as though to attack, and I reacted immediately. I lowered Alicia onto the ground before engaging our enemy.

The creature's sword manifested one *Blade* spell after another. Curiously, these *Blade* were all enchanted with different elements. They made a smooth transition from fire to water, from water to wind, and so on. *That sword's enchanted with several elements, huh?*

"No hard feelings please, friends! I want to break free from my

state too, but unfortunately, I can't move!"

"This skeleton sure loves to talk..." I muttered.

"Well, this is the only form of entertainment I can think of to break up my dull life! But if you defeat me, you might pry open a few more possibilities for your future, hottie!"

I countered all the skeleton's attacks with an anti-magic barrier that nullified any spell that struck it. This was the simplest and most effective defensive measure against the *Blade* spell. But the spells kept coming, and I grew increasingly shocked at how many elements it could manifest—it wasn't just two or three. The skeleton could attack with *every single* element. The skeleton didn't seem like a mage, so the sword must've been extraordinary.

I analyzed the situation rationally in a corner of my mind. That monster was surprisingly a gentleman, and it only targeted me. It'd limited its attack area so that Alicia wouldn't be within range.

It claimed that it was formerly human, so it was probably one of those that retained a surprisingly large amount of its personality after death. *Hmm... Maybe it'd let us leave unscathed if we just talked things out...* I couldn't help but be optimistic because it'd gone out of its way to introduce itself at the start. *But no matter what, right now, a monster's a monster. I think it's about time to put an end to this battle.*

Before I could act, the skeleton suddenly lowered its sword. "I got a proposal for you, hottie. Let's stop fighting."

"Wha— You're the one who started it...!"

No sooner had it begun its assault on us than it let up and ceased fire. *Huh, maybe that's what that person was like before they died.*

"Hottie, you're a mage of all elements, aren't you? What's your name—" Before the Skeleton could finish, Alicia's legs gave out beneath her and she pitched forward. However, almost like an actor in a play, the skeleton beat me to the punch and caught her in its arms. "She feels too warm... She must have a fever."

It's just a bag of bones! How can it even sense temperature?! More importantly... "Let her go!"

I lunged at it, but the skeleton nimbly dodged my hands—it was as agile as a cat. It laid Alicia onto the mountain of trash, lowering her into a *coffin*, of all things. That didn't bode well. If this were a joke, it wasn't funny at all. This could easily turn into a huge problem.

"Hey!" I yelled. "What the hell are you doing?!"

"Do you want a girl this young to witness such a hellish scene? How could you bear to do that to her? But, hm... Alicia, was it? This girl also called you *Slowe* earlier... And you're a mage of all elements, to boot..." Once again, the skeleton plopped down onto the chair at the top. It crossed its legs and rested its jaw on a hand, looking deep in thought. "Is this a miracle...? No, but... Okay, that's what I'll do."

It was completely unguarded during this moment, but for some odd reason, my instincts didn't scream at me to attack it.

A moment later, it turned to address me directly. "Okay, lemme give you a more proper self-introduction. I'm just like you, I'm from a ducal house."

"...What?"

Did... Did that skeleton just say it's from a ducal house? A ducal house? Which one?

The monster fetched a bottle from the junk and tossed it in my direction. *It's...water? Is it telling me to drink up? I mean, I am thirsty... Is this some kind of olive branch or something?*

"I'm Louis. Your uncle. Have you already forgotten about me, Slowe?"





“Things are looking grim, Charlotte. We have searched this far, but we have not yet come across even a sliver of information about those two... I am afraid that even *I* have to admit that I am at a loss as to what to do.”

Two days had passed since Charlotte and Blau had begun their search for Alicia and Slowe. Blau had dispatched her numerous tamed monsters into the fortress as scouts, but they still had found neither hide nor hair of the pair of them.

Blau shook her head. “I must say, I never thought Lady Alicia would choose to steal that wand instead of escaping...” she muttered. “Her courage intimidates me.”

Contrary to Blau’s prediction, the pair had not only attempted to steal the wand rather than save themselves, but had actually succeeded. Unfortunately, they had been forced to flee when the monsters under the slime’s command gave chase. Blau planned on breaking into the fortress to snatch Slowe and Alicia back once she figured out where they were, but the search bore no fruit. Her hands, to say the least, were tied.

“I have heard rumors of a secret escape route inside the fortress that only Cirquistan royalty are aware of,” she said quietly, more to herself than to Charlotte. “It’s likely Lady Alicia directed them to that path.”

“Wh-What are we going to do, then?!” Charlotte yelled, flustered. “This is all your fault, you know?!”

“If you want to criticize someone, you are barking up the wrong tree. I am a top-class adventurer, but even *I* have never heard of anyone reckless enough to steal Stain’s treasure with a party of only two people. This is unprecedented. Your ire is better spent on them.”

Indeed, if Alicia managed to retrieve the wand, she would gain great honor for her achievement and essentially earn herself the option of deciding her own future for herself. But since retrieving the wand wasn’t possible, Blau had come up with what she’d determined was the next-best plan. That, unfortunately, had backfired spectacularly.

“Unprecedented...?” Charlotte echoed that word.

Though Charlotte’s attitude towards Blau was frosty at best, she understood that Blau was putting in her best effort to locate the two. The woman took great pains to capture monsters and wring them for information. After she was done with these monsters, she threw the majority of them down the moat so that other monsters would not find out about her and Charlotte’s presence. In spite of Blau’s

strenuous efforts, she had only managed to pry out one answer from them all: “I don’t know where they are.” Blau had barely slept during the past two days, making full use of every single second available.

Charlotte chewed on her lip. Slowe had instructed her to leave the dungeon alone with the Great Spirit of Wind if she ever got separated from him. Now that such a scenario had come to pass, though, she could never abandon Alicia and Slowe to their fate.

Blau’s thoughts were a mess as she watched Charlotte. No matter how hard she racked her brain, she couldn’t come up with a solution.

But a monster’s cry suddenly gave them the vital information they so desperately needed, startling them both.

“The adventurer cemetery! The adventurer cemetery! Thieves! The two! Cornered! Lord Stain’s decree! If we kill them, we get weapon! Amazing weapon, like the two generals!”

Crowds upon crowds of monsters crossed the bridge as they left the fortress grounds. This procession made its way to a tunnel inside the rock wall—notably, one with an especially large opening.

After a pause, Blau muttered, “So they have finally found those two. That is an impressive army of monsters. In fact, I might even call it a spectacular scale. Don’t you agree, Charlotte? All of that is heading towards the so-called adventurer cemetery, where our other two party members are.”

Among the horde, one could spot beastmen—monsters which took pride in fighting with their bare hands or claws. There were also armored knights clad in metal which clanked with every step. The procession was so long, in fact, that a single glance was insufficient to gauge even an estimate of their number.

Charlotte had read the monster encyclopedia during the carriage ride, but she still couldn’t recognize most of the monsters marching along. Something big was happening—even Charlotte, who didn’t know her way around a dungeon, could tell. In her mind, not even Slowe would stand a chance against such overwhelming numbers. The monsters had even said that the pair was inside the adventurer cemetery, a sinister name that made Charlotte shudder.

The female adventurer turned to Charlotte. “I will go, but you should run away. All monsters capable of fighting are heading to the adventurer cemetery. This means that the paths to the upper levels will be all but barren now, if not very soon. If you use that trump card of yours, you can probably make it out alive.”

Charlotte hadn’t been the only one whose opinion had changed after a few days. By now, Blau had to concede that Charlotte was a bold, daring girl. She had an iron will befitting the retainer of the Dragon Slayer Slowe Denning. But taking Charlotte to the “adventurer

cemetery” was not acceptable.

“Miss Blau, I have a proposal,” Charlotte said slowly as she lowered her pet—whom she’d held in her arms the entire time—onto the ground. “I think I should use my trump card now.”

Not a moment later, Blau nearly had a heart attack due to shock.

Chapter 5: Looter Stain

A hearty laugh echoed inside the vast cavern. “Wow, this is the most epic story I’ve ever come across, I can promise you that! I’m thanking my lucky stars that I’m still alive, even if I’ve only got bones left! Who would’ve thought my big bro’s son would join an expedition into the Labyrinth of Cirquista? And you even snatched back the wand I was after once upon a time!”

Members of House Denning were banned from joining private dungeon expeditions. This skeleton, who’d gone missing inside the Labyrinth of Cirquista, was the reason why. Louis Denning had suddenly gone on his merry way to become an adventurer instead of Duke Denning and vanished into thin air. Everyone he knew, including my father, had made a desperate attempt to stop him, but Louis had declared that the position of duke simply didn’t interest him.

I stared at the monster. I pinched my cheek.

“Hey, don’t start pinching yourself. You aren’t dreaming. This great skeleton before your eyes is Louis Denning, in the flesh. Well, in the bones, really. I just disclosed so many secrets only us two would know about! Cut me a little slack already.”

I knew it. This *wasn’t* a dream.

I mean, I’d heard about the rumors of undead adventurers wandering around this dungeon. Charlotte had mentioned them as well during our carriage journey, but... *I never thought I’d meet my uncle here!*

The skeleton seemed to size me up as he muttered, “Huh. You’ve grown so much. The Slowe I know was, like, about this small, you know?” He gestured. “And look at you now. Wow...”

I’d been rather close to Louis as a child, and he’d taught me many things. He was a friendly guy who’d left his door open to everyone. Everyone had adored and admired him, whether it be the people of our lands or other nobles. Traditionally, the commoners in our lands feared the members of House Denning, but Louis had been the sole exception.

“Hey, tell me more about the outside world, Slowe. I’m starved for some good stories,” the man urged me.

And well, this legendary human—*no, skeleton*—nagged me to tell him about the goings-on outside this dungeon. After he’d lost his life

in this place deep underground, he'd apparently spent all his time hunting down adventurers that Looter Stain had chased into his lair. Basically, he'd been stuck here, so I decided to share all kinds of tales with the poor guy. I told him some insider gossip about House Denning, about my father, and about myself. On that last topic, I explained how I'd ended up inside the Labyrinth of Cirquista.

"Man..." He shook his head. "I mean, I'd heard about your awful transformation through rumors and all, but to think that the real reason was because you didn't want to separate from your dear Charlotte... You were such a Goody Two-shoes, but you turned out to be a pretty fun guy in the end! Not only that, but you even chose to target Stain's wand because you might get engaged to Alicia again? You're the best, you know that?"

It felt surreal, to be honest. In the Demon's Rise, a hellish dungeon inside the Labyrinth of Cirquista, I'd encountered Louis, who was alive and kicking, albeit in the form of a skeleton. He was even serving the dungeon master here—that infamous slime monster—and, well, I felt like this was much more dramatic than any of the stories I told him.

After Louis's transformation, the slime had used a magic item to force him to do its bidding, tethering my uncle to this adventurer cemetery as its guard and working him hard even after his death. Yet, the victim himself grinned at it all with a rattling of his bones. *Wait a minute. He's only made of bones, how is he even smiling?!*

He continued, "That goes for Alicia too! She's all grown up now!"

"Louis!" I shushed him. "Don't wake her up. She's going to get a heart attack if she sees a skeleton trying to chat with her."

"I'll just do another long explanation and convince her that I'm Louis Denning!"

Alicia lay resting in a coffin that looked like a classic vampire bed, fast asleep. The fog that'd eaten away at her health apparently didn't exist in this area the monsters called the "adventurer cemetery."

"You know, after you went missing, House Denning was in shambles. They even introduced a ban against dungeon expeditions, mind you. It was miserable."

"Well, my body looks like this now, but I have no regrets!" he declared. "The ways of House Denning weren't exactly the pinnacle of freedom to me. Even if I *did* become the family head, it was only a matter of time before I went on the run."

I sighed heavily. This guy had *always* been like this. He'd never done things by halves, and he'd dreamed big—he yearned for the great, wide world. Even the entirety of Daryth had been too cramped for him.

Though he'd been reduced to a skeleton, he was still just as easy to talk to as he'd ever been. He was supposed to be much older than

me, but he didn't act as if there was an age gap between us—he treated me like a friend. The man hadn't changed at all. *This* was truly the Louis Denning from my memories. A man who charmed all the denizens of the Denning lands, a man who'd even been on good terms with our queen... Among nobles, Louis was the only one whom the queen had treated as a dear friend.

Louis admired the wand we'd retrieved from the treasury. "I honestly never thought I'd see this Binary Wand again." Then, he placed the wand into Alicia's hand and closed her fingers around it.

Instead, I stared at the coffin. *If Alicia saw that she was in a coffin, I mused, she'd flip out about how rude we're being to her.*

My uncle turned to face me. "I'm sure you know this, but Daryth and Cirquista once fought over territory. This wand brought an end to all that conflict. The Great Spirits representing the two nations agreed that as long as this wand was within the bounds of either nation, there must not be war. It's long lost its capabilities as a weapon, but it's still invaluable. If you return this wand to its rightful place, the alliance between Daryth and Cirquista will remain steadfast. Your betrothal to Alicia will likely dissipate, as well, if you two didn't agree to it."

"Yeah. But hey, I was pretty surprised when you said that you entered this dungeon because you wanted this wand as well."

"It was an atonement of sorts. I might not seem like it, but I felt pretty guilty about leaving House Denning behind. I thought, well, I should make at least some sort of contribution to my homeland, right? That's why I accepted Cirquista's sponsorship and ended up inside this dungeon."

Huh. I didn't expect to hear that he felt guilty. My father always bad-mouths Louis. I wish he were here to hear this as well.

"On that topic..." I trailed off. "I mean, I think I know the answer already, but who defeated you?"

"That slime monster. My party decided to go with a straightforward and rather tactless plan—attack the fortress head-on. We managed to wrest away the Binary Wand, but well, I'm sure you've seen how powerful and numerous the monsters are inside. Naturally, those were only a small chunk of their massive army. The central levels were crawling with monsters that couldn't fit inside the fortress, and they just kept coming our way. We were vastly outnumbered, and so it was that we were defeated. If we'd been just a tad shrewder, we might've found more success with a different plan, but alas, we can't change the past. We lost, which is why I'm a skeleton now."

Louis, the guard of the adventurer cemetery, looked forward to one thing in his monotonous life: the occasional chat with the wayward adventurer or two about the goings-on in the world above

the labyrinth. Due to his temperament as a former human, more often than not, he'd successfully engage in a brief conversation with those people. In the end, he'd fight these adventurers and kill them.

"How did you turn into a skeleton?"

"Don't analyze it too much, Slowe. Once you learn a wicked spell, it'll pull you into an abyss and there's no going back," Louis warned. "That slime has a special magic item that's capable of doing this. That's everything you need to know."

I shut my mouth obediently.

He continued, "More importantly, tell me more fun stories. This is the only thing that'll stave off my boredom, you know?"

Despite his transformation into a skeleton monster, Louis still retained his human mind, and his yearning for the surface world left him desperate for some kind of interaction. To be honest, it felt cruel. If the slime had robbed him of his will along with his human appearance, he wouldn't have suffered this much.

What intrigued Louis the most was my engagement to Alicia.

"Huh, I see... I probably owe you an apology, Slowe. If not for us, you probably wouldn't have gotten betrothed to Alicia."

"Huh?"

"You know how Cirquista commissioned us to enter this dungeon, right? We actually had quite a long period of preparation time before our expedition, and weell... I teamed up with my comrades back then and told Alicia all about you. We *may* have exaggerated a few details. So basically, we said that in House Denning, there was a little prince who walked right out of a fairy tale. Cirquista's a nation that advocates political marriage, so we wanted to do what we could to help Alicia get a decent partner if possible."

I was speechless. *What did he just say?!*

Without a shred of guilt or sheepishness, Louis told me all about how they beautified and dramatized me in the stories they told Alicia. I was probably supposed to feel peeved, but the man was dead, so I didn't really have it in me to hold a grudge for very long.

"But I've gotta say, Slowe, you're *such* a fun guy!" Louis cackled. "You weren't able to give up on your dear Charlotte and managed to lead House Denning around by the nose! Cheers to you, my good pal. You remind me of myself, actually."

I sighed. "But *this*," I gestured, "is where I ended up. I'm honestly having regrets. If the alternative was dying in a place like this, maybe I should've been more obedient." The adventurer cemetery was a dead end with no escape route. As long as the Binary Wand was in our inventory, Looter Stain would likely never let us off the hook. "There aren't any ways out of this place, are there, Louis?"

“Exaaactly! The moment you stepped foot into this place, you were already doomed!” Though his voice was cheerful, the contents of his speech only worsened my despair. The skeleton stood up. “I’m barely clinging to life by the skin of my teeth in this inhuman form. But after talking to you, I’ve found one final goal I want to accomplish. Slowe, you don’t wanna die either, do you?”

“But we’re stuck here. There’s no way out of this...”

“Looter Stain sure is a formidable monster, that’s true, but it’s not invincible. It’s that magic item, the King’s Providence, what makes that guy seem untouchable. Once we’re able to overcome that thing, it’d be reduced to a slightly unusual slime monster.”

“The King’s Providence is that barrier, right? How’re we even supposed to take that down during combat...?”

This was literally the biggest barrier between us and the slime. I’d fought that monster inside the treasury, and I *knew* how difficult such a task would be. In truth, my mind was still reeling in disbelief over the events back then. I’d fired a dual-element spell at the monster, but the barrier had changed colors instantly, and the spell had been reflected back at me. That’d never happened to me before.

“Don’t overthink it, Slowe. Getting outta this dungeon is easy. You just have to kill Stain. Once it dies, all hell will break loose because the monsters will start an all-out war to determine the next dungeon boss. Stain’s the only monster that’d care about this Binary Wand—it’s trash in the eyes of all the rest.”

Louis Denning was a man with many legends to his name, and all of these were upset victories. He’d make a crazy comeback despite being in a desperate situation with slim chances of survival.

He continued, “Looter Stain’s a cautious guy. In fact, it’s insanely paranoid. The reason for that’s, well, how it nearly died at the hands of the Guardian Knight when it stole this Binary Wand. That monster didn’t chase you directly even after it discovered you, did it? That’s because it wanted you to end up in this hunting ground, where I would definitely end your life.”

Naturally, he hadn’t wasted all his time doing as he’d been told inside the adventurer cemetery. He said that during his entire stay here, he’d tried to come up with strategies to defeat the slime who’d been seen as matchless on the surface world. Louis plopped down onto his chair and was even crossing his legs pompously as he continued to share his tale.

“Hm? What’s wrong, Slowe?” he asked. “You look like you’re completely outta it.”

“I’m... I still can’t believe that such a slime really exists, you know?”

“But it does, so you gotta face reality, dummy.”

Yep, this is definitely Louis, all right. Only Louis Denning could be so blunt and straightforward about his thoughts. He hadn't gotten along very well with my father, but even my father had said that Louis was more suitable for the family head due to his outstanding talents.

"Hey, why do you sound as if you've lost before the match has begun?" Louis said.

"You're nearly, if not just, as special as that bastard slime, aren't you?" Louis stood up from his chair. "I'm sure you know this too—I dunno about anyone else, but *you* can shatter the King's Providence."

I fell silent.

If he had eyebrows, he'd be raising one right now. "What? Not enough confidence in yourself?"

In that run-down shack without any windows or doors, Looter Stain had seemed like an average slime monster to me. At least, it seemed that way until the moment I'd attacked it with a dual-element spell and had been countered by the King's Providence. I had prior knowledge of it, but it'd gone above my expectations.

"Slowe," Louis said patiently, "you are its natural enemy."

The magic item worked like this: when activated, a barrier of all elements would protect its wielder and reflect all attacks the wielder wished to block. It was overpowered, and now, I knew why Blau had advised against facing the slime in combat.

I frowned. "*I'm that slime's natural enemy? Why? How?*"

"I'm not making groundless conclusions. After all, your eyes are special—you can see *this*, right?" Louis's enchanted sword, Doble, changed colors as it shifted from element to element. Fire. Water. Then wind. I could see all the spirits being forced to keep up with the sword. "The King's Providence is a barrier of all elements. You can just aim a spell of a counter element towards holes inside the barrier."

I chewed on my lip and stared at him.

"See? It's simple, right?" He gestured. "After all, *you* can see the holes in the barrier *and* the current elements of the barrier as well."

Louis was one of very few people who knew of my secret. *Oh. I mean, he's not a person anymore, I guess...*

Louis rummaged around the mountain of garbage messily like a rat. It was very unseemly for a former Denning, so I hoped he'd stop it.

Finally, he grabbed something and tossed it to me. "Here, Slowe. Take this. Use it when you're dealing the last blow to Stain."

At first glance, it was a knife that looked downright ordinary. Perhaps just a tad sharp. But my instincts were telling me that I mustn't hold it, and I felt the hand gripping it grow clammy with sweat. *What material is it made of? I...can't tell.* It wasn't anything good,

however. This thing was sinister, repulsive, and eerie.

“That knife’s of a special make,” he explained. “As for what’s so special about it... I need to ask you something first.” Louis cleared his throat. “Hey Slowe, what do I look like to you?”

I blinked a few times, confused. “A skeleton monster.” The epitome of a skeleton monster, in fact.

“Buuut that’s where you’re wrong! I’m not a skeleton.”

Wait. Pause. Uh, dude, you look like the dead. The bony remains of a human corpse from every angle. What else can you be?

“I dunno the details myself,” he continued, “but after all my adventurer hunting in this place, I seemed to have evolved. I still look the same, but I’m probably a unique monster, the first and likely last one of my kind. And well, I can control the undead now.”

“Ex...cuse me?” I did a double take at the man. *What in the world is he going on about?*

He sighed. “I knew it. *I knew* you wouldn’t react in a cool way. Oh well, you’ll witness my powers pretty soon. I’ll put them into use during our fight with that bastard slime. As for this knife, it’s a custom-made artifact infused with my great and mysterious powers. Get real close to Stain and stab that guy. You should be able to put an end to everything with a single strike.”

“That’s it?”

Louis sounded confident. My job was to pierce the hole in the barrier the moment the magic item activated, then stab that slime monster with this knife. Louis’s plan was simple, but it was much more difficult than it sounded. Looter Stain was apparently paranoid, and it was even protected by a crowd of powerful subordinates, likely monsters much more powerful than the ones in the upper levels. I was already feeling dispirited. And that wasn’t the only thing I had to think about.

“Louis, once we succeed, you...” *You’ll be...dead and gone for real this time.*

Humans transformed into skeleton monsters were fated to die. There were some magic items that could mutate living beings into skeletons, and all of them had one thing in common: if the original user died, the targets under the item’s effects would perish as well. Louis *must* have known that fact.

But the man only looked at me with derision in his eyes. “You moron. Don’t worry about silly stuff like that.” *Well, he doesn’t have eyes because he’s a skeleton, but I bet he’d be doing that if he were a human.*

Then, he muttered, “Time to end this little chat. The slime’s here, and it’s with its band of merry monsters.”

He didn’t have to point it out—I’d realized, of course. The

rumbling of the ground had grown in volume with time.

I could feel my heart pounding, and my pulse raced.

“Come on, have some fun, Slowe. You’ll never get another chance like this,” Louis encouraged me.

“You’re telling me to have fun in a situation like *this*?”

There were a number of holes in the rock walls of the adventurer cemetery, and from the biggest opening, a horde of monsters poured in. Among them were the pack of barlgura we’d “hitchhiked” with on our way down to the central levels, and it was clear that all the monsters here had a sadistic desire for bloodshed. I could feel the bloodlust in their gazes, and their eyes all focused on me, who appeared to be the lone living creature inside the cemetery.

I’m so glad Louis hid Alicia earlier. I can’t let these horrid creatures see her. That aside... Seriously? I have to face all these things?

The skeleton, meanwhile, reacted differently. “Whew, I’m getting excited. This is the first emotion I’ve felt after I turned into a skeleton, Slowe!” He even seemed to be finding joy in all this.

Ah, I see. Maybe he doesn’t feel fear because he’s already dead. Honestly, I’m kinda jealous.

Barlgura weren’t the only monsters among the horde—I spotted a few giants, as well as a number of headless armors sharpening their swords. There were even demons flying around in circles through the air. At the very end of the procession of monsters was that infamous slime, riding on the shoulder of a giant.

The dungeon master was here with its monster army.

“A titan, huh...?” Louis mused. “I knew it.”

“Do you recognize that monster, Louis?”

“When I used to be a human, that thing made me suffer like hell. If only I took it down with me... Oh well.”

The titan in question had an overwhelming presence that weighed me down like bricks as it looked down at us from its heights. The slime with its distinct accent was riding on that titan’s shoulder.

In terms of numbers and individual strength, these monsters were a much more powerful force than the vampires who’d fought the crown prince of Dustour.

Yet Louis nonchalantly raised a hand in greeting. “Yo, Stain,” he addressed the slime as if it were a close friend. There was no hostility in his tone either. The moment Louis’s voice rang out, the monsters—who’d all been doing as they pleased—suddenly froze like statues. Inside the eerie silence, Louis barked out a hearty laugh. “Hey, Stain, laugh at me! I lost, you know?”

“That thief actually managed to win the guard over... I can’t

believe this.” the slime replied, wobbling with every word.

It was one of the most simply shaped life-forms possible. Its body, translucent like tinted glass, transformed into a startling red. *Is it expressing anger or something? I’m really curious. Now that I think about it carefully, I’ve never heard of any other slimes that know how to speak. This slime looks so squishy and fun to touch, but it managed to fight toe-to-toe with our Guardian Knight... That’s even more unbelievable.*

The slime continued in an ominous tone, “Then, thief... Yer gonna be the next guard... I’ll turn ya into a skeleton.”

“Hey, come on, don’t be like that. This guy’s like my little brother, you know!” Louis declared.

Turning into bones and being forced to hunt humans in this place was the last thing I wanted. But before I could say anything, Louis took a firm step forward and shielded me behind him.

He continued, “There’s something I’ve been dying to ask you, Stain! You’re such a strong guy, so why are you making me fight the adventurers during all these ‘hunts’ of yours instead of offing them with your own hands?”

“...Louis, I’m sick of fightin’. Didn’t I...tell you that before?” the slime said slowly.

“That’s a lie. You’re just scared. That’s why you’re strengthening all your subordinates with every method possible. But look at this kid. He doesn’t look strong at all, right? Are you such a coward that you’re even fearful of a kid like this?” Louis cackled with a clatter of bones.

“Louis... I placed a lotta faith in ya. Yer really strong... Ya even killed half of my subordinates. But... Yer gonna fight me again, huh?”

“Thanks for taking care of me all this time, Stain. I’m afraid our contract ends here.”

“Rebellions are unacceptable... Hey, what’re y’all waiting for...? Fetch all the central-level monsters that know how to fight... *Everyone*, ya hear me?”

“L-Louis, uh... This doesn’t look good...” I swallowed nervously.

Monster after monster answered Stain’s call, pouring into the cavern. I saw a few golems made of adamantite rather than dirt. Such stone was legendary for being unmatched in hardness, making these creatures far more formidable than their ordinary counterparts. Salamanders with bodies of pure flame flickered in the wind. To me, these monsters all belonged inside the lowest, most dangerous levels of any normal dungeon.

How am I supposed to get close enough to Stain to stab the guy with this knife?! And look at that monster! A dragonborn just appeared?! W-We can’t win against something like that! Dragonborns looked somewhat humanoid, but possessed powers that rivaled the legendary dragons. In short, they spelled doom.

But I had no choice but to brace myself and harden my resolve. I wasn't alone down here. I had someone to protect—Alicia. If I—no, if we—lost, Alicia would be left to a cold and early grave.

"C'mon, don't be so tense, Slowe. They call this place the adventurer cemetery, remember? I was the sentinel of this place. Countless adventurers fell by my hand here. But I didn't do that out of blind obedience." Louis paused before raising his voice. "Right, y'all?! Rise and shine, buddies! It's your turn now!"

Bones on the ground rattled as they rose in response to Louis's call. They were purely skeletons—not an inch of flesh left on their bones—but they weren't complete like Louis. Each of them had something missing or broken. As they got onto their feet, they began ambling around the cemetery, picking up various scattered bits of bone along the way and attaching them to their bodies.

Faced with this eerie, shocking sight, even Stain began wobbling harder from its position on the titan's shoulder. "These... These are all adventurers ya killed, Louis... They're all incomplete, but ya managed to turn them into skeleton monsters... I knew it, ya never fail to impress me. I'm shook."

"Let there be war, Stain!" Louis declared. "These guys are the remains of all those adventurers brave enough to come as far as the central levels. They're still pretty strong, even as skeletons!"

Some of the skeletons were picking up weapons even as Louis shouted his battle cry. They were spoiled for choice—weapons of every shape and size jutted out of the ground where they'd been discarded. Swords, spears, staffs, hand gloves...

The army of skeletons grew and grew. Soon, there were so many of them that my jaw dropped onto the ground. *Ah, even the bones Louis used as a chair are rearranging themselves into a tiny little humanoid thing.*

"How many adventurers did you even kill...?" I muttered in disbelief.

Louis shrugged. "The bones you see here were once all greedy adventurers that tried to plunder Stain's treasures. Most of the adventurers who make it as far as the central levels are guided here without their knowledge, and they wound up dead by my hand. Did Blau not tell you about how many adventurers go missing in the Labyrinth of Cirquista every year? There are at least several dozen. Don't forget about all the unofficial routes into the dungeon, after all."

Unofficial routes... They probably came in from the coal mine like we did.

Louis muttered, "It's a shame that these guys can't talk. They'd need practice to string together even the simplest sentences. But I can tell. We all feel the same way."

As if in response to Louis's statement, the army of skeletons began "cackling," their jaws rattling in a grotesque mockery of laughter. They didn't have voices, their mouths opening and closing but making no other sound except the creaking of bones. The resulting chatter was downright spooky, but for some odd reason, it felt really reassuring in these circumstances.

Though no one had issued any commands, one skeleton charged towards the horde of monsters. It tripped and fell with a loud crash as it ran, likely because it wasn't used to moving after lying dead for so long. But after seeing the skeleton pick itself up a second time, all the resurrected skeletons rushed forward at once.

Skeletons and flesh-and-blood monsters engaged each other in combat.

Stain announced slowly, "If any of ya manage to kill those two, I'll give ya weapons... The highest-grade weapons, ones that're on the same level as my two generals..."

The monsters at the top of the food chain roared with renewed motivation after Stain's declaration. Stain was probably referring to the weapons that the dragonborn and the titan wielded. Those weapons were clearly on a whole other level—exceptional, priceless gear.

The ground rumbled as the monsters stamped their feet, and I felt my body shake with the force of the resulting tremors. *Huh. So that's how they're boosting their morale.*

A squadron of orcs adorning silvery armor fired off a hail of arrows. Upon closer scrutiny, I could see these arrows were made of steel. The orcs on the surface made their arrows by sharpening wood, but the creatures down here possessed much more advanced technology. Their arrows were considerably faster and deadlier.

But faster and deadlier though those arrows might've been, the army of skeletons wasn't fazed in the least. In fact, some snatched the arrows out of midair, and others even did roundhouse kicks to knock them all away. None of them would go down easily to an attack of this extent. I had to admit, it was a heartening sight. It was no wonder that these adventurers had made it so far inside the Labyrinth of Cirquista.

But that was when I started to worry. I was just watching—*should I do something too?*

Louis must've seen through me, because from beside me, I heard him say, "The general always participates at the very end of a battle. In this case, you're our big boss man, Slowe."

In other words, he thought that it wasn't the right time yet. *But... Are the skeletons enough? Will they truly manage to draw Stain away and*

isolate that guy from this sea of monsters?

“Rest assured,” Louis declared, “these guys are strong.”

“Hey, Louis, I wanna ask you something. You killed all the adventurers that became those skeletons, right? Why are they obeying you? Shouldn’t they resent you?”

“Weeell... You could say I’m just that charismatic and virtuous, I guess!”

I leveled him with my best *are-you-kidding-me* look. *I mean, I’ve heard about how he was born with the gift of leadership and charisma.* He was bold and had always fought with the vanguard, elevating the morale of his troops with his presence alone. If he had stayed with House Denning instead of running off to become an adventurer, he would’ve made a name for himself as a commander by now.

However, we hadn’t reached the hardest part yet. Our chief enemy wasn’t the barlgura pack or the orc squadron—it was those two generals they mentioned earlier. Specifically, the titan that carried Stain and the dragonborn who hadn’t taken a single step since its arrival. The titan merely stood there like a menacing statue, towering over the battle with an imposing glare.

Louis continued in a grave tone, “Slowe, this is war. We gotta remember that. The infantry will lead the charge—they’ll fight first. The stronger warriors will dive in later on depending on the tide of the battle. Though, if it were House Denning, those battle junkies would likely say that the commanders should be at the vanguard, but the skeletons on our side are already at the peak in terms of morale, so we don’t really have to resort to that. The skeletons probably don’t seem like it since they don’t have flesh or faces, but trust me on this. You’re our general, and I’m your second-in-command. As for when I’ll join in... I guess it’ll probably be around the time one of those two monsters decides to interfere.”

“Are you referring to...” I hesitated.

“Those two, obviously.” Louis gestured.

I guessed as much. That dragonborn and titan must be the strongest in the opposition. Titans were berserker warriors that were exceptional among giants. Their intellect was remarkably low compared to the rest of their kind, so they relied heavily upon pure instinct.

Meanwhile, dragonborns were humanoid creatures with power that rivaled dragons. They stored their mana in the horns that sprouted from their heads. If the mana pool of a human was a cup of water, a dragonborn’s mana pool was comparable to an ocean. A scaly tail extended off their bodies, agile like a third arm. Legend said that these creatures were wise—and that humans couldn’t hold a candle to their intellect.

“Louiis! I’ve been waiting for the day when you’d rebel! I’ll make

you pay for all the bitterness you've made me taste for all those years!" the dragonborn hollered.

That's what I read about dragonborns, and uh... That guy's been calling out to us for a while, hasn't he? "Hey, Louis, if my eyes and ears aren't playing tricks on me, I think that guy's talking to you..." I muttered.

"Louiiis! Hey, don't ignore meee! Let's fiiight!" the dragonborn shouted while hopping up and down enthusiastically.

The skeleton being addressed, meanwhile, had his arms crossed pompously as he stood next to me. He didn't even spare a look in the dragonborn's direction, despite the monster's zealous appeals—his eyes were fixed on the war. Louis's mental fortitude was, well, astounding.

"Louis," I nudged him.

"We happen to have known each other for a long time, though neither of us likes it very much." He shrugged. "I fought him a few times when I was still human. I won every time, though."

"I see..."

The battlefield before us balanced on a knife's edge. We didn't know if or when the tides of the battle would change. The army of skeletons seemed to be putting up a good fight, but... *Will that still be the case after the dragonborn and titan join?*

Louis must've read something from my silence. "Slowe, are you feeling anxious? No need for fear, because all of those skeletons were heroic adventurers that managed to get this far inside this dungeon! They haven't fallen so low that you need to worry about them," he reassured me. "Weeell, if you're curious about exactly how strong they are, I'll give you some quick introductions!"

Jutting out a bony white finger, my uncle pointed to one skeleton after another. "That one with the red scarf is Hellfire Gwon, a hero from a minor nation..." he said. "The one with the black cape over there's a former S-rank adventurer, Xyzai. I murdered them. They were pretty worn out by the time they made it here, so it was surprisingly easy despite their reputation."

I felt every muscle in my body freeze. These adventurers were so famous that even *I* knew of them.

Then, Louis hummed. "The tides of battle should turn right around now," he muttered.

At the moment, the undead army seemed to be at an advantage. Skeletons were the lowest on the monster food chain, but these creatures were evolving—this gave them an edge. The experiences they'd amassed in life were slowly coming back to them. With the passage of time, the skeletons' movements were getting crisper and more effective.

In fact, I'd even have gone so far as to call their movements "elegant." That was especially conspicuous as they wrested weapons from the hands of the monster army. As former high-ranking adventurers, wielding weapons probably came as easily as breathing to them. And if my eyes weren't mistaken, there were even a handful of skeletons that were evolving even further as the fight went on.

Then, the dragonborn finally took one step forward.

I could hear Louis talking to himself. "Yikes, that guy's going to join the fray *now*? Oof, that's not good news..."

With a slow, leisurely gait, the dragonborn closed the distance. *What is he looking at? What's his aim?* I followed the monster's line of sight and saw Louis. Only Louis, in fact.

The dragonborn's horns were even turning a shade of crimson, perhaps because Louis was giving him the cold shoulder. Those horns were the symbol of a dragonborn's power, and red was a dangerous signal. *Wow. I can't believe he's getting so mad because Louis won't pay attention to him.*

My uncle scoffed through his teeth. "Looks like the most troublesome guy's going to fight. Those skeletons can't deal with a monster of that caliber. I'd like to avoid our troops being decimated, if possible, sooo... It's earlier than I'd planned, but looks like I gotta join the battle now."

Without another word, Louis disappeared, as if he'd dissipated into thin air. The next time I saw him, he was deep in the battlefield, facing off against the dragonborn.

"Louiiis!" The dragonborn's voice boomed. "Fight me! I got permission from Lord Stain!"

Both of them were fast. And powerful.

The moment Louis's Prisma was poised to strike the dragonborn, there came a sudden explosion, followed by a thunderous roar. I fought the urge to cover my ears.

The sword that the dragonborn brought to bear against Louis's Prisma was Bakoyannis Blast, a sword that could explode, to be blunt. A smaller sword like Louis's shouldn't have been able to fend off such a blow. But Louis had swooped up into the air without so much as a scratch from the blast.

Blinking away the spots in my vision, I saw Louis lunging at the dragonborn, only seconds away from cleaving the monster's head clean off with Prisma. However, using pure physical strength alone, the dragonborn sent Louis flying into the air.

Distance meant nothing to these two challengers. The dragonborn was born with overwhelming physical ability, and after a closer look, I noticed that he wore nothing but magic accessories enchanted with spells that enhanced the wearer's strength and speed. *So that explains*

why he's insanely fast...

Opponents darting around the battlefield at high speed were my worst nightmares. Skilled melee fighters were always the natural enemies of mages, that much was an established fact. The dragonborn was a fearsome monster—but Louis was just as otherworldly, because he was able to keep up with that lightning speed.

“The tides *have* turned...” I muttered as I watched on.

After Louis joined their ranks, the skeleton army distanced itself from its leader to avoid becoming collateral damage. Their strategies began to shift as well. Some formed small squadrons, and some gave out commands to their fellow skeletons. I even spotted a few whose bones had changed color. Their evolution had quickened after defeating the monsters of the central levels, it seemed. In fact, among these evolved units...

One let out a battle cry before screaming, “Take thaaat! That’s the force of my many years of resentment!”

Whoa. Looks like some can even speak now.

The dragonborn, however, seemed obsessed with Louis. He shouted, “Louis, looks like you’re still just as strong as ever, even after transforming into a skeleton! I’m elated!”

Any distance between the two didn’t last, because in the next instant, they’d be clashing again. I couldn’t tell how many blows they traded whenever they crossed paths. But I *could* hear the chain of explosions—a display of how fierce the duel was.

“Good, very good, Louis!” the dragonborn yelled, sounding pleased. “You’re faster than when you were alive!”

Apparently, Louis had known that monster since his adventurer days. *Okay, yeah, I’m gonna leave that guy to my uncle. I shouldn’t interfere.*

During their duel, Louis also took out a few of Stain’s monsters on the side. The evolution of the skeletons and the presence of Louis changed the flow of the battle.

And finally, Stain, who had been a spectator of the clash between the dragonborn and Louis, decided to act. It pointed to the battlefield and began whispering something to the titan it was riding. They were both different species from me, which meant that I couldn’t understand what they were saying, but I braced myself for the worst.

At the very least, that titan was an easier opponent for me to handle than the dragonborn with lightning speed. Louis was dealing with the strongest monster around, so I couldn’t complain about this.

“Y’all are so puny, but so annoyiiin’...” the titan drawled.

There had been giants in the first wave of monsters, but this titan towered over them all. With every step, the ground trembled fiercely beneath its weight. I finally had an answer about the tremors in the

ground that Alicia and I had felt—*this* guy was the culprit. Its movements looked dull and slow, but the weapon it wielded made me shudder.

Within its grasp was a gigantic club. Electricity crackled with its every strike—this was the Polaris Lightning Club, a weapon that once belonged to an ancient titan king.

How did I identify it, you ask? *I mean, it's not that hard to tell when you're seeing what I'm seeing.* Monsters unlucky enough to be in the line of attack of the titan's club screeched as they turned into a burnt shade of black. The titan was sweeping the skeletons in its way, but its allies there weren't spared either. The swings caused winds so fierce they even blasted ogres into the air.

Howling gales lashed at me, and I had to use every single muscle in my body to stand my ground. If I ever took a direct hit, I'd meet a violent and bloody dead end. *But... Louis is doing everything he can against that dragonborn. The skeleton army doesn't look like they stand a chance against a titan, which means that...* I took a deep breath to harden my resolve. *Looks like I'm the only one who can take this guy on. I gotta do something about it.*

But not a moment later, my breath hitched in shock. With a thunderous rumble, the rock walls of the adventurer cemetery came crashing down as a colossal quadrupedal monster emerged from the resulting gap. Its size gave even the titan a run for its money. A quick swat of its front leg sent the barlgura pack flying and slamming into the wall.

I was willing to bet that no one inside this entire battlefield had predicted this sudden newcomer. At a second glance, it was even bigger than the titan. Its white and green fur was sticky with the blood of some unknown creatures—it must have fought something before it arrived here.

A familiar voice rang out. “Ah, there you are, Slowe. I finally found you, meow.”



Altanger, the Great Spirit of Wind, had arrived in their true form. On their back, I saw Charlotte and Blau, the adventurer whose face was pale in shock.

The Great Spirit, who had smashed through the wall, had an appearance that reminded me of wolf-type monsters, but they were on a completely different level. Their glare made the quadrupedal monsters cower in fear. For a single moment, the eyes of every moving creature inside the adventurer cemetery bore into the Great Spirit, whether it be Louis, the dragonborn, the titan, the golems, the skeletons, or even the more powerful monsters we were against.

I made a snap decision. “Altanger!” I yelled. “I’ll leave that big dude to you!”

I had so much I wanted to say to them. For example, Blau was on their back—did this mean that she’d found out the Great Spirit’s true identity? But I forced down any and all unnecessary chatter. After all, I had the best reinforcements I could ever ask for! *Charlotte, thank you so much. You brought along our trump card and used it at exactly the right time!*

The Great Spirit took a sidelong glance at the titan before flashing their fangs in a feral grin. “A titan, hm? You seem like you’ll be more fun to toy with than the orcs, meow.”

“Blau!” I continued to bark out orders. “Your job is to protect Charlotte and Alicia. Especially Alicia, her body’s giving out because of the fog around here! She’s inside the coffin over there! Quite the fashion statement, right?!”

Blau replied in near hysterics, “Hold on a minute! What the hell is going on?!”

“No time to explain!” I yelled. “Oh, and the skeleton army are allies! Make sure to avoid them, okay?!”



Blau had been aware that inside the central levels was a place called the “adventurer cemetery.” In fact, according to her calculations, she had the best chance of finding Louis’s corpse there if it were still intact.

The monster Charlotte had brought along as a companion had broken through the walls of the cemetery by force, and when the dust had cleared, Blau had come across a horrifying sight—an all-out war.

There were two factions involved. One was a group that consisted mostly of skeletons. The second was an assorted mix of monsters, some of which were high-class monsters. Those who’d ever laid eyes on these monsters rarely lived to tell the tale.

But analysis would have to come later. Her top priority was exactly what the youth had said—she had to check on Alicia, her client.

Blau found Alicia hidden inside a coffin, and she fed the girl medicine as she muttered, “I am so sorry, Lady Alicia...”

The girl almost looked like a vampire as she lay inside the “bed,” and for a moment, hot anger flared up in her chest. *What kind of sick joke is this?* she thought in fury. But she had to admit her begrudging gratitude towards the youth who had shielded the girl from all harm.

A skeleton with a wand had been stationed near Alicia, and after Blau had arrived, it passed by the woman and sprinted into the midst of battle. Blau discovered that the skeleton had channeled an intricate and advanced spell that had hid Alicia’s presence impeccably. Though the skeleton hadn’t made any attempts to communicate—it was likely either mute or incapable of human speech—it didn’t seem like an enemy.

Color immediately returned to Alicia’s complexion after she swallowed some medicine, and both Blau and Charlotte, who’d been with her the whole time, breathed a sigh of relief.

As Alicia’s condition improved, Charlotte was no longer as tense, and she finally had the time to take a good look at her environment. Very soon, she spotted a rare and extraordinary monster. “That’s...a dragonborn, isn’t it?” she muttered.

Blau frowned. “I understand that dragonborns are few and far between, but how could you be so care...fr...” Her speech ground to a halt as her eyes widened. “How—”

The woman’s eyes were glued to a single monster inside the battlefield. To be more specific, it was the skeleton who fought toe-to-toe with the dragonborn.

The dragonborn kicked the ground hard and leaped forward. It was fast—it closed the distance almost instantly. The sword in the skeleton’s hand began to shine.

And oh, how could Blau ever mistake that weapon for something else? It was Prisma, the sword she had been searching for all this time. “It...can’t be...” she muttered deliriously.

The creature wasn’t a human. It was a skeleton, through and through. However, Blau knew that Looter Stain possessed an item that transformed other creatures into skeleton monsters. Through her information network, she had also heard that there was a skeleton monster inside the adventurer cemetery who had once been a human. And now, she even saw the inhuman moves the skeleton pulled off in battle. She could come to only one conclusion.

Her mind went blank, and out of pure instinct, she tore away the

bandages that hid her face before screaming, “Is that you, Louis?!”

Luck, however, was not in her favor. A golem suddenly spawned from the ground, obscuring “Louis’s” silhouette. An adamantite golem, in fact, made of a material harder than even diamonds. Bounty hunters would drool at the sight, but Blau’s heart didn’t race in excitement. Quite the opposite.

From between clenched teeth, she hissed, “You’re in my way!”

An earth spell shot in her direction—the golem was attacking her. The force behind it was no joke; it was comparable to a swing of a death god’s scythe.

But Blau didn’t falter. *Louis*, the adventurer she had admired and longed for, was right there within reach. This golem paled in comparison to that dragonborn, not to mention the fact that Blau was a monster tamer who dedicated her life to the research of monsters. She knew the weak point of adamantite golems was the jewel on their throats.

With a thrust of her Sword of Light, she pierced the life source of that golem. “Get out of my sight!”

The golem made from one of the hardest ore in existence crumbled into dust.

“Louis!” a woman yelled. “It’s me!”

Louis didn’t respond. He continued to focus on his battle.

His opponent, the dragonborn, was one of the most powerful monsters he had ever come across in his bloody life. But one shouldn’t underestimate the man known as Louis Denning—even after his transformation into mere bones, the skills he had cultivated as a human didn’t lose their luster. If anything, his moves were even swifter than before because he had lost all the unnecessary meat that dragged him down.

His soul was invigorated—dread didn’t dull his limbs. Ever since Slowe had appeared, his soul had lit up like a bonfire, heated and eager.

Skeletons didn’t have souls. That was an established fact. Louis used to think that way as well, but if that were the case, how else could he explain this thrum in his nonexistent soul?

There was already a clear victor between the two, and the dragonborn sighed. From his position on the ground, he muttered, “Outstanding, Louis. You’ve always been a strong warrior, and that hasn’t changed at all... I’m content.” His eyes closed.

The monster wasn’t dead—he was only unconscious.

Naturally, Louis wasn’t unscathed. He had lost his left hand. The dragonborn had crushed it into fine dust; there was no hope of recovering it.

For a moment, Louis stood there in silence. He *had* noticed that Blau, one of his former comrades, had arrived in this place. However, he didn't have the luxury of time to attend to her.

A conversation of two booming voices entered his ears.

"Time to blow off some steam, meow," the colossal cat said casually.

"Wh-What the hell are ya?!" the titan stammered.

"I'm a god, meow."

"I-I'm not stupid, ya know?!"

There seemed to be an overwhelming difference in power between the titan and the cat. In fact, the cat was even toying with the titan as if it were a powerless mouse. If the cat ever decided to take the fight seriously, it would be over in seconds.

Louis could feel the extraordinary amount of power rolling off the cat monster like waves washing over the entire cemetery. The creature emitted a bone-chilling aura, and even Louis had to suppress a shudder. Despite diving into the midst of a war of powerful monsters, the cat acted as if it were on a picnic. It even seemed to be finding joy inside this hellish landscape.

Everywhere the creature went, there was a bloodbath. A flick of its tail easily put monsters out of their misery.

"That tingly club you have is annoying, meow."

The Great Spirit of Wind cleanly wrestled the titan onto the ground before tossing it into the air. With a loud bang, the titan crashed into the wall. The impact shook the entire cavern, and large clumps of dirt and rocks began tumbling down from the ceiling. Faced with this scene, some of the monsters cowered.

On the other hand, the skeleton army was unfazed. Lost a head? That was perfectly fine, they could just find it and attach it again. Though, well... A handful of silly adventurers made the careless mistake of putting on a head that belonged on someone else.



"Yo, General. Any time now," a skeleton said cheerfully as he gave me a friendly tap on the shoulder. As I observed the monster with a black cape, the one Louis had pointed out once belonged to Xyzai, I wondered how many evolutions he'd experienced in this short span of time for him to speak so fluently. He continued, "At first, I couldn't even recall my name, but I just did. I have to thank you and Louis for that."

The black skeleton paused in his talk with me to give out instructions to the fallen skeletons, ordering them to stand up again and fight the monsters. Then, he addressed me again. "You know,

when I was promoted to S-rank, I thought I was on top of the world. But then, Louis killed me when I got here. I was revived as a bastardized version of a living being, and I tried to kill Louis many, many times. But he told us to cooperate with him to kill Looter Stain, and all of us waited and waited for someone special to arrive. And then, well, you came.”

The scene unfolding before my eyes was simply unbelievable. The bones scattered on the ground began moving once again at the black skeleton’s command and charged at the monsters. These skeletons carved a path through the sea of monsters—a path that led me straight to Looter Stain.

The gentlemanly skeleton’s voice echoed on from next to me. “If Louis’s claims are true, we’ll lose the moment our enemies discover your ability. He assigned me the duty of hiding you until the last second. So let’s leave the pip-squeaks to the others while we get as close to Stain as possible.”

If Stain died, these skeletons would all lose their lives too. They should know that very well, but I couldn’t sense any gloom from them. I’d even go as far as to say that they seemed jolly.

Inside this dark cemetery, Louis had bestowed a fleeting life upon the adventurers who had reached the end of the line. Though he’d caused their demise, these adventurers felt gratitude towards Louis. Even this gentlemanly S-rank adventurer displayed a reverence towards my uncle. *Sheesh. Louis’s charisma’s way too scary.*

The skeletons flocked around giants and culled their lives as they went. My allies were all fighting while knowing that it only pushed them closer to a permanent death, but pointing this out would be extremely boorish of me. My only job was to walk down the path they created for me. Closing my eyes for a brief moment, I hardened my resolve. *Let’s do this. They’ve done all the work for me. There’s nothing to fear.*

“That giant cat looks like it’s on our side, and I must say, it’s freakishly strong,” the black skeleton commented. “It managed to defeat that titan... I don’t know whether I should be scared or impressed. You know, I never thought that I would be surprised by anything after my death, but now I know better.”

The Great Spirit of Wind was fighting to their heart’s content. Their huge size worked out in our favor—since everyone paid attention to them, no one would notice me sneaking around.

“All right, hide behind my cape!” The gentlemanly skeleton stood in front of me with his black cape, fully concealing my figure like a wall. “A rather troublesome pack of barlgura has arrived, it seems!”

I looked over to Stain. It didn’t pay any attention to me—rather, its attention was sharply focused on the battle at hand. *Good.* At the

moment, in Looter Stain's eyes, this was a mere rebellion started by the keeper of the adventurer cemetery, Louis Denning. We mustn't let it realize that its natural enemy had sneaked into the ranks of the rebel troops.

The monsters that served as Stain's guards were currently fully occupied with fending off the skeletons. Thanks to the valiant efforts of the bone army, there was a clear path between me and the enemy boss.

I'd heard that Stain was, by nature, a very cowardly monster, and I could see evidence of those claims. It'd already activated King's Providence, and all attacks that should strike its body were reflected instead.

"My brethren!" The gentlemanly skeleton raised his voice and fanned the flames in the spirits of his allies. "Endure! Persist! Stand your ground! If you last long enough, Louis's good pal will kill Stain once and for all! After we defeat that monster, let's brag about it in the afterlife! Let's tell everyone that we died an honorable death!"

Wow, pressure, much? Those skeletons wholeheartedly believe that I'll kill Stain and are giving it their all, thrilled to accomplish a legendary feat by slaying it. And... This is all possible because of Louis's irresistible charisma. If I'd come here alone, I would have met a bitter end at Stain's hands.

Finally, the gentlemanly skeleton addressed me again. "Hey General. Have you spotted the holes in the barrier of King's Providence?"

"Very vividly."

"Ah... That's amazing. Louis said that you could see spirits with your eyes. So he was telling the truth."

"It sounds absurd, doesn't it? Are you going to believe him?"

"Well, Louis never lies, so I choose to believe."

I paused. "I see."

While my skeleton allies waged war, I had spent the entire time observing. King's Providence didn't erect one barrier—rather, it had multiple layers of barriers. Now that I was closer to Stain, I could see the holes even more clearly than before. My job was to tear off those layers one by one like peeling an onion.

As for the barriers themselves, they were of a fascinating structure. Six barriers were piled on top of each other and automatically switched positions when they sensed that their wielder was under attack. Each barrier was infused with a different element and almost seemed to have a mind of its own as they protected Stain.

When a fire element monster approached, the water barrier would move to the forefront and repel that monster before it could strike Stain. When an earth element golem approached, the wind barrier

would take the brunt of the force instead, and so on.

“Okay...” I focused. “One layer at a time. First one.”

The orb of light I fired off struck the darkness barrier. One layer was down, but I’d heard from Louis that King’s Providence would reconstruct the barriers if given enough time. I needed to destroy the second layer without delay.

Five layers left. The darkness barrier had been destroyed, and in its place, the water barrier came forward.

“Hm?” Stain let out a confused noise as it wobbled its jellylike body. “Somethin’ broke my barrier?” It seemed to look over its surroundings before commanding, “Hey, y’all! Kill the mages first!”

“Considering how flustered it is, you must have succeeded,” the gentlemanly skeleton muttered.

“Um... I want to get a little closer, if possible.”

“Of course. Let’s go.”

Thanks to the bountiful number of monsters around, Stain hadn’t caught on to my presence yet. I was willing to bet that other humans would be stumped by that barrier. Only the Guardian Knight had ever been able to land a hit on the slime, proving how powerful Stain was. However, I could see the single weak spot inside the protection of King’s Providence.

I’d already taken down one layer, but Stain didn’t look too concerned, probably because it could still write this event off as sheer coincidence. From my hiding place behind the cape, I kept my eyes peeled for my next opening.

I didn’t wait for long. A good old wind arrow dealt with that water barrier very well. *Two down.* Instantly, the third barrier manifested. *Fire next, huh?* I channeled an orb of water.

Panic was evident in Stain’s voice as it shouted, “Wh-What was that?! Hey! They have a sniper! They broke *two* of my barriers!” Once was an accident, but twice was hinting at a pattern. Stain barked out an order at once. “Gather up, y’all! Right *now*! Danger! There’s a dangerous enemy! Find that sniper!”

The third barrier expanded in area, likely in response to Stain’s fright. The fire barrier stood strong, locking out all attacks that came its way. Even Stain’s allied monsters were under friendly fire by the reflected attacks of King’s Providence. The slime didn’t seem to care, however. It single-mindedly channeled the power of the magic item to protect itself. *But the fact Stain’s such scum works out in my favor. I don’t have to hold anything back!*

“Somethin’s attackin’ me! Whoever finds that sniper, I’ll give ya one of my weapons in my treasury!”

Twisting and turning, my orb of water pierced the hole of the fire barrier with a snap, almost like a whip. *Third one down, and I’m*

halfway there.

By the third, Stain fixed its eyes on me and hollered, "It's you!!!"
Damn. Well, it was about time it discovered me.

The gentleman skeleton muttered, "Looks like it found you. Let's split up. Don't worry, you can do whatever you want. I'll protect you."

I began sprinting as fast as my legs could take me. The skeleton exterminated any monster that tried to make a move on me.

My eyes were already drawn to the hole of the next layer. The moment I cast my next spell, the wind barrier fell. *Four down.*

"Wh-Wha... Who the hell are ya?!" the slime shrieked.

I'd only gotten so far because my uncle and the skeleton army had handcrafted an environment where I could focus on the slime alone. The distance between me and my target shrunk as I ran—I had to deal the last blow with Louis's knife.

A monster with a lion's head pounced at me. However, the gentlemanly skeleton took that attack in my stead. As he flew through the air, he gave me a big thumbs-up. "Looks like this is it for me. Oh well."

"Thank you so much!" I yelled.

I was almost there. Just two more layers, then the curtains would fall on my long battle inside this dungeon. My memories of my journey flashed before my eyes.

I left Kirsch and got onto a carriage. Accompanied by an adventurer filled with mysteries, we arrived at the border, where bandits attacked us. After we got into the Labyrinth of Cirquista, things were a breeze until we made it to the central levels, where I ended up faced with a despairing trial. Alone with Alicia, we sneaked into the treasury inside the fortress and retrieved that wand. Then, with monsters hot on our heels, we wandered around tunnels for several days without direction. Then we hit a dead end at the adventurer cemetery...where I met an old friend, Louis.

With the Binary Wand, the symbol of friendship between our nations, I'd be freed from my betrothal to Alicia, but that wasn't all. It would be a great contribution to Cirquista and Daryth's alliance as well. *When we hand it in, I gotta tell everyone about how much Louis helped me. The man whom my father denounced as the black sheep of House Denning actually played a big part in an achievement that will go down in history!*

Just a little more to go, Slowe. Then, you can go home.

Victory was within reach, and perhaps because of that, I let my guard down. This small lapse in attention was what tipped the scales slightly in Stain's favor.

I only just realized that something was flying in my direction from inside the barrier. The maws of death opened wide. *I can't avoid it. Too fast.*

King's Providence wasn't the only magic item in Stain's inventory. I knew that. I *should* have known that. Though it was too late, I channeled my mana to destroy the fifth barrier. Taking down the sixth might be impossible for me, but who knows? A miracle might happen.

In my last moments, I thought numbly, *I'm so sorry, Charlotte.*

The instant before the blinding spell could smack me right in the face, something white stretched out and blocked my vision—chalk-white bone. The skeleton stripped of flesh looked small, but in my eyes, it was the most reliable figure in the world.

“Looks like you’ve still got a ways to go, Slowe! You should thank your lucky stars that I’m here to save your ass!”

Louis took the blow for me. That was why I was still alive and unharmed.

The skeleton fell onto the ground with a clatter. His right foot had been smashed into pieces, but that didn't stop his bones from chattering. “Slowe!” he yelled. “Don't stop!”

He saved me. If he hadn't come to my rescue... I would be dead.

“Louis! Are you okay?!” I yelled.

“Don't bother with me! Even if that guy doesn't have King's Providence, it's not an easy opponent! I'm sure you learned that lesson firsthand!”

I know. I knew from the very beginning. This is where my real battle starts—the moment I destroy its barriers.

I sprinted past the fallen Louis and kept running as fast as I could, as if there were explosives beneath my feet giving me momentum.

Stain was within my reach. King's Providence activated and the last barrier manifested—a light barrier, and I used a blade of darkness to shatter it. With this, the barrier of all elements that protected Stain was no more.

“Go!” Louis ushered. “You can see spirits, so you can *do* this!”

My father had once warned me to never confide in anyone about my sight. That once I did, I would be done for.

I channeled mana into my limbs, enhancing my muscles to the max, and I could almost hear them screeching in pain. Without the King's Providence, Stain was as vulnerable as an infant.

“Save me!!!” Stain hollered.

But it wouldn't go down without a fight. It extended out several tendrils from its body and flailed them in my direction. Unfortunately for this monster, I could rely on my sight. Stain had enchanted its body with some sort of spell and was instantaneously transforming its attributes. I dodged each attack as I inched closer and closer.

I can see you. Its tendrils were fast, but I could make out each tendril's individual movement. Then, for a moment, my eyes "met" with Stain's.

"Y-Ya can see spirits?!" the creature shouted in panic and fear. "Wh-What the hell are ya?!"

The monster that had once terrorized the world now trembled as it tried to flee from me. It sent more tendrils my way, and I was disgusted at the sight. I'd never seen such an eldritch-looking slime monster before.

I kept my cool as I steadily whittled away the membrane of Stain's body without so much as a twitch of my brow. Now, I saw why Louis had claimed I was this slime's natural enemy.

The slime shrieked. "Who the hell are ya?! S-Stop *lookin' at me!!!*"

"That's my line!" I retorted. "You're nothing like the slimes I know!"

I had to acknowledge this slime's achievements. It must have devoted its entire life to strengthening itself from the moment of its birth. Its fascination with magic items had only further fueled its conquest, and in the end, it had even managed to make a dragonborn and a titan join its army of monsters. An epic success story indeed. "Dark horse" fit the bill for this thing to a T.

"I'm a slime! A monster that rules over all these guys!"

No way in hell. Listen up, Stain. Slimes are cute little things that are adorable because they're round and squishy! But look at you! I refuse to acknowledge that such a grotesque being is a slime!

As I shaved off more and more of its protective membrane, its tendrils began to lessen in number. At first, they'd moved at a speed that seemed impossible to evade, but they grew increasingly sluggish as well.

Stain screeched, "Damn it! What the hell *are* ya?!" It screeched out to the surrounding monsters, calling for their aid.

But the skeleton army wasn't about to let that happen. They all reacted on the fly and isolated us two from the chaos of the battlefield. Among them, I could see the gentlemanly skeleton and the Great Spirit of Wind, the latter of whom looked bored to tears by now. In fact, they were even grooming their fur. *Wow, the nerve.* Our eyes met, and I could see the message in their gaze: *Finish it, Slowe. Meow.*

"Well, well—" I mustered up every drop of strength I had in my body. "—looks like you ran outta luck when you met me."

I thrust my arm forward, stabbing the creature with Louis's knife.



●

Looter Stain let out a shriek of fear.

Run, its instincts screamed. A forgotten emotion surged in its mind.

All its life, Stain had been invincible. It had built an army from the ground up and had empowered the monsters by bestowing treasures from its collection. In fact, its ambition didn't stop there—it had even considered taking over the lower levels of the Labyrinth of Cirquista.

Run. I need to run.

Alas, none of that mattered now, because fear was what propelled Stain. Fear of that human.

Looter Stain was a predator—a hunter inside this dungeon. It was on the top of the food chain even inside this infamous labyrinth. Not only was it powerful as an individual, it was even one of the dungeon masters inside the central levels. And now, this legend was fleeing for its life with its proverbial tail between its legs without regard for shame or reputation.

“Urk!” it choked as its vision suddenly grew dark.

Louis Denning, who had been reduced to a skeleton, had evolved with every adventurer kill to his name. He had been oblivious, but he had actually arrived at the final evolution of skeletons—it would not be an overstatement to call him the Undead King. His knife had been infused with the very essence of death itself.

“Louis...” Stain gasped. “Why...?”

This day marked the death of a slime who had lived a long, long, life.

Final Chapter: Return from the Labyrinth

Even now, my mind was reeling from the excitement that simply refused to leave me. But unlike what others might expect, I didn't exactly get a rush from defeating a formerly unbeatable monster... *How do I describe it? It's more of a satisfaction that wells up from the bottom of my heart. Ugh, this is hard. At any rate, we did it!*

"Alicia, are you feeling all right?" I asked.

"I'm completely fine now," she muttered. "You don't have to worry so much about me."

I once heard that an adventure was only complete after the explorers made a safe return. Apparently, many would get injured on the way home because they let down their guard after they had accomplished their mission. *I see. What profound words. I completely agree. But in the case of our adventure this time, well... Maaaybe we can chill a little on the way home compared to our tense journey down from the mines. I mean, look! Our route back feels completely different!*

A gruff voice echoed out. "Guys, this is the party of the century! Don't miss out! Take and grab and snatch up everything you can!"

We'd returned to the upper levels of the Labyrinth of Cirquista. Tents dotted the path we traveled—adventurers had set up home base up here. They apparently also served to stake their territory, warning adventurers that didn't belong in their group to keep away.

During our journey into the depths of the dungeon, we'd avoided other adventurers like the plague, but we constantly bumped into them on the return trip. A great number of adventurers were hunting down monsters inside the upper levels, and according to Blau, it was a foreign sight even to a veteran like her. She'd never seen the labyrinth so crowded before.

An animated adventurer approached us and began chatting with us. "You guys! Did you just come back from the central levels? You must've heard the news, then! Apparently one of the dungeon masters died and all the monsters are infighting! Not too sure which damned bastard kicked the bucket, though!"

As he continued the conversation, I learned the situation from the enthusiastic man. The Adventurers' Guild had detected a sudden plummet of the monster population in the upper levels and had then issued an urgent notice to all these guys inside the labyrinth.

His information was pretty accurate. After all, Demon's Rise was currently a very hectic place filled with monsters vying for the position of the next dungeon master.

After I stabbed Stain with Louis's knife, the slime fled from the adventurer cemetery and likely perished soon after. Almost immediately, there was a riot inside the cemetery on a scale that made the previous war seem like a game in comparison.

The dragonborn who had suffered defeat at Louis's bony hands turned out to be a pretty reasonable guy, and he shed some light on the situation for us. He explained that all the monsters had sensed the death of the dungeon master and were duking it out to decide their next big boss.

And, well... For its war against Louis, Stain hadn't just summoned all the monsters of the central levels; it had even called upon capable monsters in the upper levels, which meant there was a chaotic bloodbath not unlike the war we'd narrowly avoided with Dustour. The adventurer cemetery wasn't the only area affected—the battlefield covered the entirety of the central levels.

There was one silver lining, I supposed. After Stain's escape, the monsters had lost all interest in us humans.

We took that opportunity to take our leave upon the back of the Great Spirit of Wind, who carried us to the upper levels. When we arrived at the stairs, even from afar, I could see the fortress being torn down into rubble in the aftermath, which gave me quite a shock.

Back to the present, I called out to Alicia. "Hey, you've been pretty quiet for a while... No questions? Like the identity of the beast we were riding?"

Alicia had recovered from the sickness the fog had given her, but she hadn't interrogated us about the events inside the cemetery.

She gave me a sharp glare. "I'll! Ask! Later! I'm still completely lost about what happened, you know?!" She seemed intent on wringing an explanation out of us once we arrived on the surface, but I wondered whether we would have the leisure of doing that. *I mean, we'll head back triumphantly with the Binary Wand in hand. My gut is telling me that a hectic period is soon to follow...*

Oh well, at the very least, judging by her reaction, Alicia probably hasn't realized we tucked her into a coffin earlier. Phew.

For now, we all seemed to agree that getting out of the dungeon was our top priority.

An ecstatic voice poured into my ears. "Woo-hoo! Now you're talking! The world's my oyster!"

The entire upper levels were filled with crazed shouts of joy as high-ranking adventurers found a bountiful haul. To put it simply,

since there were fewer monsters around, the upper levels had turned into an all-you-can-take treasure buffet. Usually, valuable loot was guarded by powerful monsters, but they'd all abandoned their posts to join the contest for dungeon master. It seemed that the stairs weren't the only passageway to the central levels.

All the high-ranking adventurers were so deranged that they almost looked like they were high, so to speak, and man, it was terrifying.

Speaking of high-ranking adventurers, unlike the silent Alicia, Blau was rather eager to talk.

"Charlotte, I am in awe... How did you manage to tame such a fearsome monster?"

"Huh? Uh, it's not exactly a monster."

"I was only able to form a sturdy bond with Futay—with that Arachnidarus, I mean, due to a lucky encounter when Futay was only a hatchling. But that wasn't the case with that cat, was it? From my observations... It must have lived a few centuries, at least."

Perhaps talk wasn't the right word. Singing Charlotte's praises was more accurate. Blau had mistaken Charlotte for a fellow monster tamer and seemed to feel a sense of kinship. Charlotte was trying to clear things up, but she was struggling. Meanwhile, the main cause of said struggle, the Great Spirit of Wind, was walking at her heels with a *none-of-my-business* face. From the looks of them, they must have sated their craving for a stress-relief toy after "playing" with the titan.

Blau shook her head slowly. "As a fellow monster tamer, I am ashamed that I didn't realize your pet was a demon cat that could live for centuries." Apparently, the caliber of a tamer's monsters was an indicator of the strength of the monster tamer, and Blau was now feeling humbled and embarrassed by her own immaturity.

I looked back to Alicia, who had a sour look on her face. Back at Kirsch, she'd sometimes played with that cat, but after discovering their true identity, she was jumpy about their every action. "H-Hey! Don't come any closer! Miss Charlotte! Carry that kitty in your arms! It's dangerous to let it run free!"

Now then... Alicia's spoil of war is the Binary Wand, and mine is probably this thing. I cast my eyes down at Louis's weapon, Prisma. A sword enchanted with all the elements, and one of the family heirlooms of House Denning. At the same time, it was a memory of Louis, and I didn't want to leave it in that cold, dark cemetery. Blau had apparently searched for it, but funnily enough, she didn't confront me about having it in my possession.

As we headed further up into the upper levels, we bumped into a rather curious party. These guys wore uniforms with blue and white as

their theme color, and when they saw Alicia, they wept with joy.

“Your Highness...! I am so glad to see that you are safe.”

They weren’t adventurers, but Cirquistan soldiers. Their march inside the dungeon was brisk and orderly despite their environment, and I couldn’t help but be drawn to look at them. Unlike the soldiers of Daryth, who were inexperienced in the field of dungeons, their formation was systematic and tailored to purpose. Dark patches of what was likely monster blood clung to their clothes. Just as I’d heard, dungeons weren’t on a Cirquistan soldier’s list of fears.

One man stepped forward. “I cannot overstate my relief at seeing you hale and hearty. Our king and your other family were very worried about you.”

Alicia hesitated. “Sorry about that,” she muttered.

Cirquista had long discovered that Alicia was inside the Labyrinth of Cirquista, and these soldiers had been dispatched to pursue her by Alicia’s father. Despite only being soldiers, they had apparently been determined enough to invade the central levels if they didn’t find Alicia on the upper levels. Their courage was impressive.

“Your Highness,” the soldier asked, their voice faltering, “may I ask where...”

“It’s right here.” Alicia held out the map she had sneaked out.

The soldier—who seemed to be high up on the ladder—accepted the book politely. This book was the crystallized effort of Cirquista’s royal family, who had mapped the dungeon bit by bit over time. They couldn’t afford to let it end up in the hands of outsiders.

Alicia formally expressed her gratitude towards the soldiers that marched into the face of danger. All of a sudden, she seemed like an actual princess, which was a rather odd sight.

I nudged her. “Looks like we weren’t able to hide anything, huh?”

She shrugged. “I think part of the reason they were so zealous about looking for us is their concern for me, but that book was just as important.”

I paused. “Oh. In any case, with so many friendly faces around, it’s hard to keep my wits about me.”

Despite being in one of the most dangerous places in the world, our journey back became even safer after the soldiers joined our party. Until now, Blau had taken us down the shortest route while referring to the map, but the soldiers took over that role. It was a little surreal, to be honest. On our way down to the central levels, we had to talk in hushed whispers, but now, even if we made a commotion, Blau didn’t tell us off.

We requested the soldiers to share some of their rations, and they readily gave us their food. It tasted so delectable that my eyes teared up. In retrospect, it was only meat on the bone grilled with a little

salt, but I felt as if I were in heaven.

In the middle of our return journey, Blau left our party.

“I will have to bid you farewell here.”

She said that she was worried about the Arachnidarus she had left in the coal mine. She also added that since we would be fine without her, she could leave in peace.

Alicia and Charlotte were reluctant to part with the woman, and the sentiment seemed to be mutual. While they talked to their hearts' content, I gnawed on the smoked meat I'd received from the soldiers as my mind wandered.

Being able to snag an adventurer like Blau had been like winning the first prize of a lottery—a miracle. She knew the Labyrinth of Cirquista like the back of her hand and could make snap decisions no matter what she encountered. She had never even protested once after seeing the true form of the Great Spirit of Wind or that war with the skeleton army on our side.

Begrudgingly, I thought, *Shuya, the adventurer you found was nothing short of amazing. Good job, dude. I should tell him that after I get back to Kirsch.*

A voice snapped me out of my thoughts. “Slowe Denning,” the woman said, “I have a few words for you as well.”

I froze. “Me?”

She began her farewell speech with the sentence, “I am thankful that fate has allowed me to meet you.”

Wow. I never thought she'd ever thank me. Is this really Blau?

However, the next moment, she began lecturing me about putting Alicia into a coffin, and that I mustn't fool around again. *But I wasn't! That coffin also served as a bed for Louis, the person you cherish, by the way.*

For some reason, moments before her departure, she whispered into my ears, “Don't get mad after you find out the truth.”

What the heck is she going on about?

The soldier leading the way turned around and announced that we were approaching the exit. Hearing that, I decided to bring up a topic that I'd deliberately avoided until now. I felt that once we saw the boundless sky again, all our experiences in the dungeon would suddenly feel hollow, so I wanted to talk about it before we left.

I tossed the abrupt question to Charlotte, who was walking next to me. “Hey, Charlotte... Do you think my father... Will my father believe me when I tell him that Louis lived on as a skeleton in this dungeon?”

Deep inside the Labyrinth of Cirquista, I had met an old friend. A man who had been so cheerful that nothing could clip his wings, a

man who had always taken his life into his own hands. Even if he had looked nothing like his former self, his soul had remained just as bright—he *was* Louis Denning.

“I...don’t think he would. Who could have ever predicted that Lord Louis turned into a monster...?”

Charlotte was probably right. Though he’d already disappeared for over a decade, that stupid, impulsive, heartless *jerk* was still one of the touchy, taboo topics inside House Denning. My family’s impression of him was set in stone.

“Yeah, that sounds about right. If I hadn’t seen him for myself, I’d be filled with disbelief as well.”

But no matter how surreal it had been, my encounter with Louis in that adventurer cemetery hadn’t been a dream. I had physical evidence, in fact. A souvenir called *Prisma*. *Huh. I’m curious how my father will react when he sees this. Will he be elated? Sad? Well... Either way, that man won’t let any of his emotions show, of course.*

“Hey, Master Slowe. Was Lord Louis just like how he was in your memories?”

“That guy hadn’t changed a bit. He was still the same old Louis everyone knows and loves. I almost want to laugh at how identical he was.”

“Wow... Transforming into a skeleton didn’t affect him at all. He’s such an amazing man.”

“He was actually laughing about the fact he became an eldritch horror.”

“I think Lord Louis was content. I only got to talk a little while with him at the end, but I could tell.”

“Yeah... I think so too,” I muttered as my memory of his last moments floated to the surface of my mind.

Stain fled, and the moment it vanished, Louis announced its death in a voice loud enough for everyone to hear. At the same time, the skeleton army stopped fighting. Unrest washed over our opposing monsters like a tidal wave, and they seemed to be at a loss about what to do.

As for me, I immediately returned to Louis’s side. The skeleton lay flat on the ground, and he looked like he’d lost all ability to move. However, we were able to have a brief conversation. Most of the things he said to me were reassuring words that soothed me.

During our talk, I promised Louis something—Louis warned me to not walk down the same path as he did. Wanting to ask him what he meant, I uttered his name, but this time, there was no reply. My uncle departed this world, leaving only an unmoving skeleton behind—as he should.

Before I’d realized, we arrived at the entrance of the dungeon

while I reminisced about my farewell with Louis. A little more than half a day had passed since we began our journey to the surface, but it had passed by in the blink of an eye.

“Wheeew... This must be what people feel when they say, ‘I live.’”

The sun was the first thing that greeted us when we arrived on the surface, welcoming us with warm rays of light. It was noon, contrary to my expectations. I’d assumed it was night. Like I’d thought, my perception of time had malfunctioned inside the dungeon.

“We’re finally back, Master Slowe,” Charlotte whispered.

“Feels like it’s been centuries, oink.”

The surface world was wonderful. The air was fresh and clean, and I felt revitalized. Indeed, the underground world wasn’t the place for us—we belonged on the surface that was vibrant and painted in a myriad of colors.

I would never set foot in a dungeon again if I could help it. Alicia and Charlotte seemed to agree.

Then, the soldier of high standing approached us and said, “We have prepared rooms for all of you.”

Adventurers’ Guild Cirquistan branch, Arrowslitting Void, was a stronghold constructed at the foot of a mountain range. Though it was a fortress as well, it was much, *much* more charming and elegant than the crude monster fortress in the labyrinth. According to the soldiers, this place also served as the base of operations for national defense, so Cirquista chipped in for the funding.

The range of establishments here was extensive. Pubs, smithies, more than a handful of inns... The fortress was livelier than anything I’d ever seen before, and the soldiers escorted us to the most luxurious hotel available.

At the entrance, Alicia parted ways with us.

“Your Highness, please come with us.” The soldier bowed to Alicia.

She was probably going to be fine. The soldiers were planning on immediately sending a message to the Cirquistan king informing him that they had found Alicia safe and sound, and Alicia wanted to contact her father as well to give him the big news about our successful Binary Wand retrieval. She seemed like she wanted to dissolve our betrothal as soon as humanly possible.

On the topic of the Binary Wand, when the soldiers had seen it, they had nearly fallen over collectively in shock. They had even strongly refused taking custody of it—a display that had shown us how valuable this wand was.

The distinguished soldier showed us to our room. Alicia had a

room to herself while Charlotte and I shared one.

“Master Slowe, what do we do now?”

“Well, first things first...” I trailed off.

Over half a month had passed since our departure from Kirsch. We hadn’t told anyone we were going before we’d left—not House Denning, not the staff at Kirsch... In other words, we were staying outside without permission.

In Alicia’s case, those soldiers were dispatched. As a member of House Denning, I was pretty sure that my family would do something as well. But we’d deal with all of that later.

“...Let’s sleep.”

“Good idea...” Charlotte yawned.

We were dead tired. Utterly exhausted to the point that I couldn’t find the right adjective for it. My eyes had been glued to the pristine, white bedsheets the moment I’d entered the room. My body was craving a safe, worry-free, and comfortable rest.

Soft mattresses, clean sheets—I could never ask for more. Being able to lie down without any unease was already the best thing in the world. For the next few days, the main thing on my itinerary was vital rest.

Charlotte and I each flopped onto our designated beds and slept like logs.

On the next day, we had an audience with the elderly guild master of Arrowslitting Void. During this meeting, we were to give our testimony about what we had seen inside the dungeon.

The higher-ups of the Adventurers’ Guild had apparently concluded that my group had been the main culprit behind the recent chaos. Their theory was that due to some action on our part, the monsters had vanished from the upper levels and were likely battling for the title of the next dungeon master inside the central levels.

Their guess was, of course, right on the money. We had defeated Looter Stain, after all. There was no point lying, so we spilled everything obediently.

After a moment of silence, the guild master muttered, “Unbelievable. You defeated *Stain*? I thought that it would run rampant for another few decades before someone powerful enough appeared...”

Shock was apparent on the faces of the guild staff. They were especially intrigued by how I had managed to get past Stain’s infamous defense, but I only gave them a vague reply. *What else am I supposed to say? That I can see spirits and could exploit the holes of the barrier of all elements rapidly in succession? I’m not stupid.*

As I continued my story, the man raised an eyebrow at a

particular name. “An S-rank adventurer named Xyzai? That brings back memories... I did hear that he lost his life inside the Labyrinth of Cirquista. Did you perhaps find his signature weapon or something?”

I mentioned the names of the skeletons that I’d heard from Louis to confirm their identities, but of course, I could never reveal that I’d met them in the flesh. *Or well, in the bones, I guess.* The people that had saved us were truly humans who had once walked these lands before they had lost their lives and flesh inside the dungeon. I got a big shock once again after learning exactly who these heroes were and their accomplishments when they were alive.

Later on, when she had the opportunity, Charlotte told me what she’d learned from Blau. As it turned out, that woman was the reason for Alicia’s kidnapping down in the depths of the dungeon. In other words, that lady ran away without even stopping to apologize first! So that’s *why she asked me to not get mad before she left...*

“M-M-Master Slowe! Big news!”

There was a letter for me, apparently. *A letter for me? Me alone? The heck? Nearly nobody’s supposed to know that I’m here in Cirquista. I’m not even in Daryth!*

“It’s a crimson letter!” Charlotte continued. “So it *must* be for you!”

Hearing that House Denning had sent it dispelled all of my surprise and questions. My family had connections in other nations and our influence network didn’t stop at our national border. And well, I was quite aware that I was kind of a celebrity at the moment. If House Denning made a serious effort, they would locate me immediately. I hadn’t exactly hidden my identity when we had arrived at this guild branch either.

Retainers were forbidden from reading red documents. Only the direct descendants of House Denning were allowed to peruse the information.

Taking the letter into my hands, I muttered, “Well, let’s see what they wrote in this thing. I have a pretty good guess though.”

My brief period of respite, it seemed, had come to its end. *They’re probably gonna tell me to go home right away. Hm, what are they going to say to me when I get back? News about my betrothal to Alicia? But when I saw Alicia this morning, she told me it was completely dissolved. House Denning should already know that Alicia retrieved the Binary Wand, and that I was her accomplice.*

In that case... Huh. I’m not too sure what this letter is about. Maybe it’s full of praise for me?

I skimmed through the contents. The moment I finished, I winced. *Yikes.*

“Master Slowe, what does it say?” Charlotte asked nervously.

Then again, to be honest, I wasn’t *too* surprised about what I had just read. It was one of the possibilities that my mind had come up with.

“I-It wasn’t anything big, really,” I stammered. It took all my willpower to squeeze out these words. But I probably wasn’t able to hide the quiver in my voice from her.

The letter, to put it simply, said that Charlotte wasn’t suitable as my retainer. The retrieval of the Binary Wand was a heroic accomplishment, but she should have stopped Alicia’s foolish plan.

For once, it wasn’t a letter condemning me, but Charlotte. In my mind, the last words Louis had left me inside the dungeon echoed.

“Don’t walk down the same path as me.”

I made up my mind.

“Charlotte,” I said slowly, “I know it’s overdue, but I’m considering talking to my family about our relationship.”

It was finally time to face the music.

Afterword

I like characters that make the reader's imagination run wild. I love the little hints these characters drop during their interactions with other characters that keep the reader guessing about their pasts, as well as nicknames and titles with profound meaning. With that in mind, I threw one of these characters into *Piggy Duke: Volume 9*.

To tell you the truth, since the stage was set in the central levels of the Labyrinth of Cirquista, I wanted to add in a few more monster characters with actual names, but I ended up throwing that plan out of the window with tears in my eyes because it became unmanageable.

Now then, until this volume, Slowe had always deliberately avoided a confrontation with his family. Partly due to his diligence, I intentionally kept them out of the story, but I think it's about time they enter the spotlight. I want to tie up the current story in *Piggy Duke: Volume 10*, so letting House Denning make an appearance would be appropriate.

Here, I would like to thank everyone who was involved in volume nine. Without all of you, this wouldn't have been possible.

See you again!

Rhythm Aida
(Published April 17, 2020)



9

Reincarnated as the Piggy Duke

*This Time I'm Gonna ♡
Tell Her How I Feel!*



Alicia,
marrying
me. Alicia,
marrying
me.

“So
you were
lying to me
back then...
How could
you, Master
Slowe?!
I trusted
you!”

Charlotte Lily Huzak

The princess of the once-great
kingdom of Huzak, which now lay in
ruin. Currently Slowe's retainer, a far
cry from her former royal position.

Alicia Bulla Dia Cirquista

The second princess of Cirquista,
the Metropolis of Water. Slowe's
former fiancée.

“Oh,
you... Was
Charlotte
mad at you
again? You
poor thing.”

Slowe Denning

The protagonist who reincarnated into the
world of his favorite anime. The third son of
House Denning, and a problem student at
Kirsch Mage Institute. At least, he used to be...?

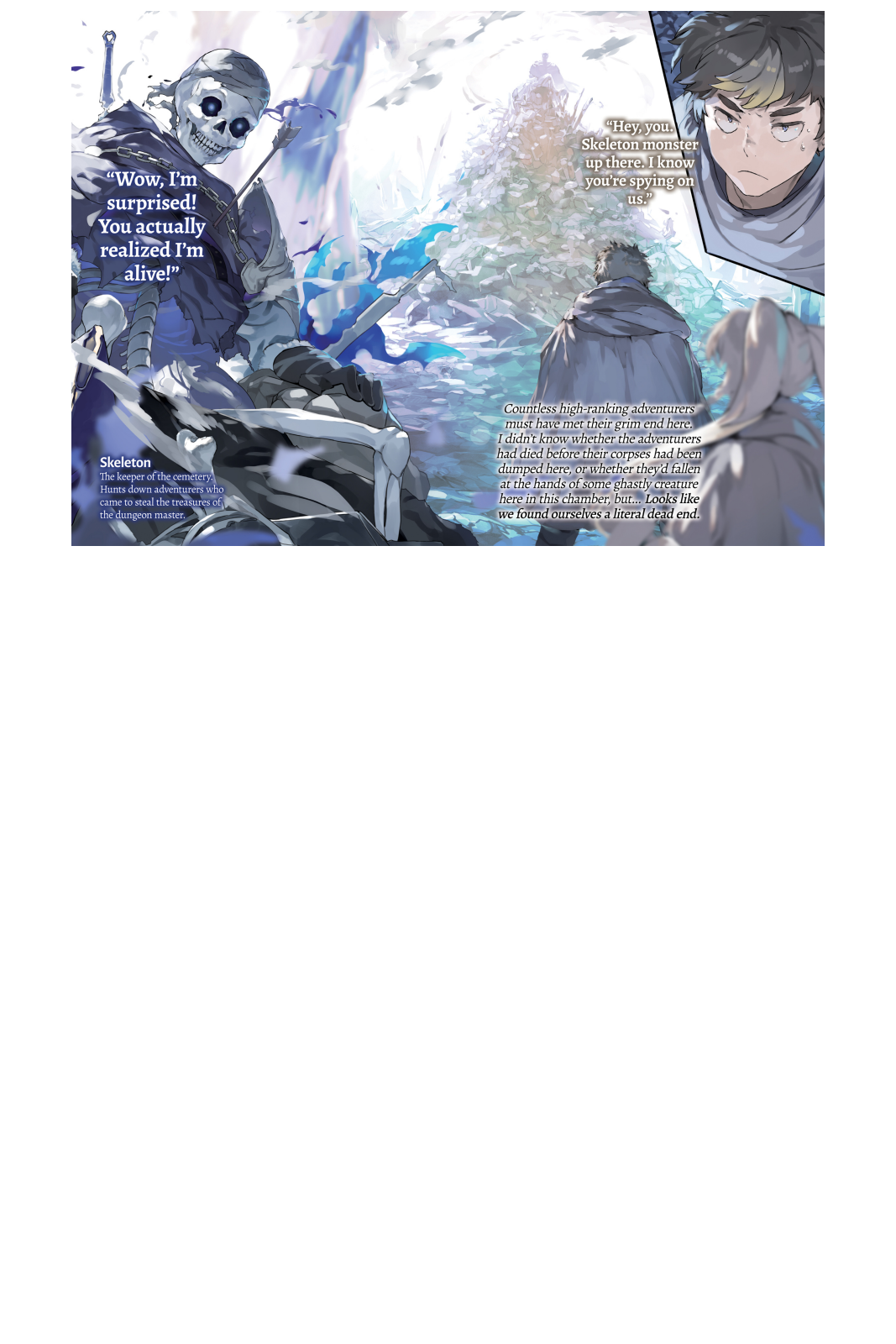


“It will
get in the
way when
I try to
detect any
monsters
nearby.
Make sure
it stays as
quiet as
possible.”

Blau

A high-ranking adventurer that Alicia hired. She provides her services to Alicia and company during the dungeon expedition through the Labyrinth of Cirquista, but something's odd about her.

Alicia and Charlotte
stared, dumbfounded.
Most likely, neither of
them had managed to
make out what had
happened in the dim
light of the glowgrass.



"Wow, I'm surprised!
You actually realized I'm alive!"

Skeleton

The keeper of the cemetery.
Hunts down adventurers who
came to steal the treasures of
the dungeon master.

"Hey, you.
Skeleton monster
up there. I know
you're spying on
us."

Countless high-ranking adventurers
must have met their grim end here.
I didn't know whether the adventurers
had died before their corpses had been
dumped here, or whether they'd fallen
at the hands of some ghastly creature
here in this chamber, but... Looks like
we found ourselves a literal dead end.

Translator's Notes

Welcome back to this latest edition of Weird Trivia. I'm Zihan, the translator for *Reincarnated as the Piggy Duke*! I'd like to share some background about some of the more obscure terms we had to localize, as well as some weird Japanese legends along the way. So let's jump right into it!

Prologue: A Shocking Engagement

Absolute

When Alicia sits next to Slowe in the dining hall, Slowe is in disbelief because she absolutely despised him. The original term used to emphasize her loathing literally translates to “destroy tea and bitter tea.” It describes something preposterous or disorderly when stand-alone, but when used as an adverb, it means “absolutely” or “extremely.”

As always, there are a few debated origin stories. The most popular one assumes that *meccha* (“destroy tea”) is derived from *mucha* (“no tea”). Specifically, not serving your guests tea—or giving them bitter tea—in a country that takes traditions and respect very seriously is considered absolute lunacy! Thus, it is now used to describe something absurd.

Zihan's Bonus Round: *Bubuzuke*

Speaking of tea and manners, here's a fun story. *Ochazuke* is a traditional and simple Japanese dish made by pouring tea, *dashi* (“soup stock”), or hot water over cooked rice. It dates back all the way to the Heian period (AD 794 to 1185).

In Kyoto, *ochazuke* is known as *bubuzuke* in local dialect. This is where things get interesting. A stereotype of people in Kyoto is that they are the most passive-aggressive people you could ever find. If they say, “Wow, your watch is beautiful,” they actually mean, “You've been talking for way too long, look at the time.” A popular legend says that if a Kyoto citizen offers you *bubuzuke* during your visit, they're actually telling you to “Hurry up and leave.” In fact, it was so famous that it even inspired a Kansai *rakugo* play called *Kyou no Ochazuke*, roughly “*Ochazuke* of Kyoto,” with records dating back to the 1830s. (*Rakugo* is a form of verbal entertainment where a lone

storyteller tells a comical story with props. Sometimes satirical.)

Now, how much of this is true? Well, the people of Kyoto apparently *did* have the habit of asking whether their guests would like some *bubuzuke* before they left, but it was more about being polite than making an actual offer. They didn't actually intend on serving the dish, so they would be taken by surprise if the guests took them up on it, or so the legend goes. That became a meme, essentially.

In the present and in practice, however, this offer is mostly genuine. The original intent behind the offer of *bubuzuke* is actually, "I don't have anything fancy to entertain you with, but how about we enjoy *bubuzuke* together?" *Bubuzuke* is a common dish for breakfast and dinner, so there's no need to be wary nowadays!

Worried for nothing

After much thought, Slowe concludes there is no way Alicia would be engaged to him, and he thinks he was worried for nothing. The term used here can be loosely translated as "anxiety of Qi." It's based on a story in *Liezi*, an ancient Chinese text attributed to the philosopher Lie Yukou.

There was once a man in Qi, a minor feudal state in ancient China, who was so terrified of the sky and ground collapsing that he couldn't stomach food nor sleep. A friend, worried, came up to him and said, "The sky is made of air, so it won't fall down."

The man asked, "Then why aren't the sun, the moon, or the stars falling down?" (Since there's nothing to support them.) The friend replied, "Because those are glowing air as well, you see."

The man, however, wasn't done. "What about the ground then?" The friend replied patiently, "It's a thick layer of soil, so it won't collapse." Finally, the man was convinced, and the two celebrated.

Of course, from the perspective of someone who knows about meteors and landslides, these aren't *ungrounded* fears. There's actually a continuation of this story where another person brings up the possibility that the sky and the earth might collapse. However, the story concludes that some things are unpredictable and beyond human power, so there's no point worrying about them.

Chapter 1: The Hermit Cirquistan Princess

He that would the daughter win, must with the mother first begin

House Denning wants Slowe and Alicia to be betrothed once again, and they set their sights on Charlotte first. The original term used here means “those who want to shoot down the general must aim at the horse first.”

It’s a very common military tactic, but this phrase specifically is taken from a verse in the poem of Du Fu, a Tang dynasty poet and politician, which can be roughly translated into “If you want to kill the general with an arrow, you must shoot the horse first. If you want to take your enemies captive, you must take their king captive first.” Tackling a problem directly sometimes isn’t the most astute strategy—striking the target’s allies or winning their associates over is more effective.

Impossible to agree

In his mind, Slowe declares that it is impossible for him to agree to a marriage with Alicia. The specific term he uses is a negative form of *unomi ni suru*, which is literally “swallow like a cormorant.” In its plain form, this word describes someone accepting something as truth mindlessly, especially groundless rumors. Cormorants are fishing birds that have a habit of swallowing down fish whole and storing them in their throats. Thus, they are compared to people who swallow down someone else’s words without taking the time to think critically on what they’re hearing.

Chapter 2: Journey to the Labyrinth of Cirquista

A terrible scolding

Alicia earned a terrible scolding when she had gone to Zenelaus with Shuya of her own accord. Terrible scolding here is *kyuu wo sueru*, literally “moxibustion therapy.” Moxibustion is a traditional Chinese therapy that involves burning dried mugwort on acupuncture points on the body.

Though moxibustion is a medical treatment, it also has a history of being a punishment for naughty children, though it’s rarely seen nowadays. The first mugwort burned on the skin is referred to as the *kawakiri*, or literally “skin cutter,” because it feels just as painful as carving out skin. Therefore, it served as a painful lesson and warning for children, and is now used to describe scoldings just as extreme.

Chapter 4: I Walk through the Valley of the Shadow of Death...with My Former Fiancée

Moles

When Alicia and Slowe wander around the complex network of paths during their escape from the fortress, Slowe thinks they have to sneak down the narrow passage like two moles again. The Japanese kanji character for *mogura*, moles, is literally “earth dragon.” In ancient China, “earth dragon” actually referred to earthworms. However, since moles eat earthworms, the two words were mixed up when they arrived in Japan, and they just kept it that way.

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Reincarnated as the Piggy Duke: This Time I'm Gonna Tell Her
How I Feel! Volume 9
by Rhythm Aida

Translated by Zihan Gao
Edited by Ori Starling

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